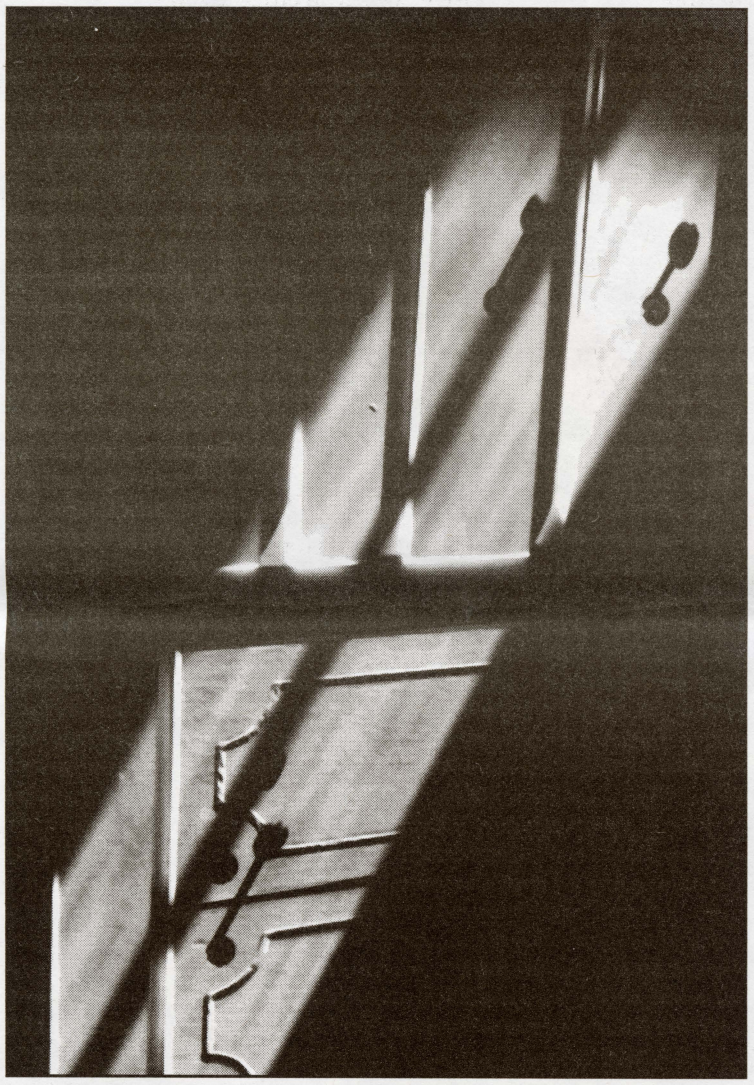
spectrum

Twilight Urgency

Kat Thorn

Captivated by her fragrance
She is plucked from slumber
In awakened grogginess
He whispers
She knows what he wants
Turning
unwrapping herself
(The winged flower emerges from her cocoon)
Lifting to receive the Intruder
Anticipated Jolt
Wings enfolded in glutinous fluid
He relents

Packaged in depleted appendages
Greeted by the rise and fall of a chest cavity



Julie Ceanfaglione

Full Circle

Pat Brocato-Simons

Pushing her through the brightly lit and festively decorated pavilion, laden with row upon row of both man- and machine-made crafts, so many thoughts bounced around in my head. Like how tired I was, and how I had homework and housework waiting for me when I was through, just for starters. I switched my internal gears and thought about planning for Thanksgiving dinner (which I so graciously offered to my family of 30 or so), and whether I could manage to get the family room painted by then, a mere 12 days away.

"Oh, stop here," she alerted me. "Take me closer so I can see them." My grandmother's voice rallied me out of my daydream and back to the present, where I was being ordered (at the age of 45, mind you) to push her wheelchair closer to a large basket of stuffed animals. Of all the eye-catching and unique wares being offered up at the craft show, my 81-year-old grandmother fancied the stuffed animals the best of all!

My gut reaction was to say, "Come on, Gran, grow up," but of course, I did not, for a variety of reasons. First off, out of sheer respect, the kind you learn, or should have learned, way back when. Second, because my grandmother has always been an animal lover, so I suppose it does not much matter if they are the living, breathing kind, or the cute, cuddly ones with stuffing for brains and buttons for eyes and noses. And third, but not least important, is the well-known fact that most of us, through the natural progression of aging, make a full circle back to childhood at some time in our lives.

"Sure, Gran," I responded, in the dutiful manner any good grandchild should. I wheeled her up to the basket, brimming over with a multitude of Noah's Ark miniature replicas, and she targeted right in on a very cute, but common-looking gray and white stuffed cat.

"Isn't he cute? I want him," she declared, in the manner she uses when you know it is a definitive statement, and one not to be argued with. She pulled out two five dollar bills, and handed them to me to pay for her purchase. She was delighted. I was rolling my eyes, and wondering why this grown woman of 81 needed, or should even want, this ordinary stuffed animal. She already possessed an entire bedroom full of the furry creatures in every shape, size, color, and pedigree. Oh well, that is my beloved Gran! Hair gone white and limbs that do not operate as they once did, closing in on the expiration date of a well-worn lifetime warranty. And Gran's hearing, at roughly five-percent total capacity and declining, requires that I speak rather loudly and repeat myself often. Exasperating, yes. But it is probably not much different from how she must have felt when dealing with me, as a child. And now this so-called "role reversal" I have been hearing about for years has finally come to pass.

My grandmother was born on January 15, 1918. She never had the luxury of a long and pampered childhood like many children born today. She married my grandfather and produced my mother promptly at the too early age of 16. Four boys followed in close succession. Oh, the stories I could relate about that brood from either being told, or actually being there. But most important, in my opinion, is how my grandmother (without giving birth for a fifth time) nurtured and loved a little girl as her very own; that little girl, of course, being me.

Because a mere 16 years exists between my Gran and my Mother, and later, 19 years between my mother and me, my recollections of both of these prominent women in my life are that they seemed to remain eternally young. The three of us kind of grew up together, so to say, showing each of us first-hand the pros and cons to having offspring at an early age.

Growing up in Gran's house was always an adventure. We lived in a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland, known as Dundalk, in a big, white house with a front porch that sat on a double-wide corner lot, with a magnificently huge weeping willow tree smack in the center of the yard. I loved that tree. There was a little stream that ran past the rear of the yard, and you could catch tadpoles in there if your heart was set on it. Mine was not! But Frank, the youngest of my four uncles, could entertain himself for hours chasing after them, and me, with one of those squirmy things in his hands.

"Gran, Frankie's gonna' throw a tadpole on me," I would whine as I flew into the house with Frank in hot pursuit.

"What a baby you are. You're no fun," Frank would chastise as he retreated back outdoors to escape Gran's wrath.

We had a ritual every evening at sundown, me and my devoted Siamese cat, Kippy, my Gran, and sometimes my Mom. Just down at the end of our road was Fort Holabird, an army base, and like clockwork, just before sundown, bugles sounding out the melodic rhythm of Taps would reverberate throughout the town. There we would sit on the front steps, listening to the bugles announcing that day was done, and waiting for the last glimpse of the setting sun to obey their musical command.

Kippy and I were the best of friends until I was 11, at which time she became ill and promptly died in my closet one night.

"Where's Kippy, Mommy?" I asked her over and over again for the better part of two weeks.

"She's sick and the cat hospital is trying to make her all better," my Mother would respond. Finally, somehow, my Mother found the courage to tell me that Kippy had died. I remember Gran did not fancy cats much back then. She tolerated Kippy for my mother and me, who are both avid cat lovers.

My grandmother used to drink beer on the holidays when the house was full of family and love and happiness. These are some of the fondest moments I have of her, sitting on the back porch playing Pokeeno (a hillbilly name for the game of Bingo) with my Great-Aunt Elizabeth (Gran's favorite sister; thus, Aunt Sis). Gran colored her hair something akin to Lucille Ball's, and would often tie a scarf around her red curls, making her appear youthful and innocent, which is how I often picture her. Aunt Sis had natural, fiery-red hair, and a personality to match. She smoked like a chimney, cursed like a sailor, and visibly lit up any room she inhabited. I was crazy about her. I can still hear her loud, boisterous laughter intermingled with a persistent smoker's cough.

These are the times that Gran would get a little frisky and mouth off at my grandfather, and the sparks would start flying. You see, it was only with that liquid injection of confidence, and a bit of Aunt Sis' cocky influence, that she would speak up like that. I

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remember thinking, "Good for you, Gran, go get him," because 99.9 percent of the time, my grandfather most definitely wore the proverbial pants in the family.

"Why is Grandpop always in a bad mood?" I recollect inquiring of my Gran on more than one occasion.

"Oh, he's just an old fuddy dud," she retorted. "I don't pay him any attention." Ha! What a joke! I knew better! We all did!

My mother, the only girl, was quite spoiled and most definitely, "Daddy's little girl." And even though my grandfather scared even his own children with his iron-fisted ways, there was a certain respect, almost dumbstruck awe, that he compelled us to feel, and we all surely did. But this was not so where my grandmother was concerned. Most everyone considered her a pushover, I suppose stemming from watching and listening to the interactive role-playing between her and my grandfather. And with pushover status, you also get taken advantage of, albeit loved with a vengeance.

So my mother and my grandmother shared days as the best of friends and the worst of enemies, and not much in between the two extremes. And as luck (and heredity and fate) would have it, my mother and I share the same. As a teenager, if I was not punished by my mother for the weekend (you know, the weekends as a teenager that we all lived and died for?) I could be found shopping with her (which did not translate to similar tastes, mind you) or crying on her shoulder over my latest broken heart.

They say, "All things come full circle" and "What comes around, goes around." An all-time favorite is, "Like mother, like daughter." I say they are right on the money. I vividly remember days that I thought I truly despised the woman that gave birth to me. I also just as clearly call to mind days when only she, my guardian angel here on earth, could make a seemingly hopeless moment or situation brighter and less traumatic. I believed many times in my childhood that she had the magic remedy for anything that ailed me.

These days, whenever my mother and I do something together, I am the designated driver, the surrogate mother for the day. I often pull out the "magic money" card and treat her to lunch or treat her to a "just because" present she happens upon during our travels. Unlike my grandmother, who has lost much of her mobility to move around freely and without assistance, my mother can still shop till she drops, and most of the time, I drop before she does.

"Mom, they're locking the doors and turning off the lights. Let's go," I implore her.

"They won't leave without us," my Mother responds as she continues to search through racks of clothing she has probably been looking at for well over an hour or more. God, does that drive me absolutely crazy! I always vow to myself that I will not plan another one of those shopping excursions again any time within this Millenium!

Gran is another story, though. My once vivacious, fun-loving, arms-always-open Gran is retreating ever so slowly into a world only she can relate to. I find her sleeping too much, crying a lot, and having more bad days than good. Getting her up and dressed and motivated enough to go outdoors for some fresh air is a chore in itself. I succeeded once again, though, insisting along the way that she apply a little make-up, clip on a pair of earrings, and spray a dab of perfume, all in the hopes of reviving her spirit of yesterday. And that is how we came to be at the craft show, stopping and fondling every species of animal you do not require a license to own.

"Come on, Gran," I try to persuade her. "You don't need another bear like that. Don't you have one almost identical keeping guard over your bed right this very moment?"

"No, he's different, and I want him," she states quite defiantly as she puffs herself up as straight as she can in her wheelchair. And so another 15 dollars makes it way out of her purse and into an eager vendor's hands.

"Well," I ask myself, "What else does she have to spend her money on, any way? If it gives her pleasure, just the slightest bit in this twilight time of her life, who am I to begrudge or question her?"

I cherish this time with my Gran. Yes, it steals me away from schoolwork and housework, and my work work. And to top it off, I carry the requisite and eternal "guilt complex" of never spending enough time with my own children or cherished friends and family members. But the thoughts are fleeting. I remind myself of the total and unselfless love this woman has gifted me with for the last 45 years, and how I often fall asleep at night wondering if her already-overflowing scrapbook of life will hold one more day's reckonings.

"I'm not long for this world," she informs me, on those especially bad arthritis aching days. "I think it's about time I should go be with Pop."

"Oh, don't be silly," I reprimand her. "You're not going anywhere anytime soon if I have anything to say about it!"

Of course, I do not, just as none of us do. Gran's departure from this life is all in the master plan. The die is already cast, as my mother can attest to any given day she was overheard to say, "God is going to get even with you one day and give you a daughter just like you, and then you'll see how it feels." She was right, of course. With the passage of time comes experience, which leaves us with knowledge and makes us wiser (if we are lucky). I now fully understand and appreciate my mother's words and all they represent. I see so clearly genetic snippets of my Gran and my Mother and my daughter and me all jumbled up and intertwined and overlapping in each of us.

I pray I'll always possess the wherewithal and the courage to know the right times to keep close and hold on tight or to ease up and let go. Hopefully, the love that is both given as well as received, never really disappears. If I am on the right track, and all the good books say I am, it should just keep traveling full circle, as a true circle has no beginning and no end, but is a continuous, unbroken, and never-ending path.

"Come on, Gran," I say as I help her up the steps to her room. Kali and Gran and I just finished watching *The Little Mermaid II*, a new Walt Disney classic Gran insisted watching not once mind you, but twice, in the same sitting. "Let me get you all tucked in so I can do some schoolwork."

"Before I take out my hearing aid, tell me what you did with my cat and bear I bought today?" she asks me, perched on the side of the bed.

"They're right here, Gran, already in the bed waiting for you," I tell her as I point to them sitting atop her pillows like cute little guardian angels in disguise. "Sweet dreams," I whisper against her forehead as I kiss her goodnight. "Sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite."

I have been reciting the same, silly bedtime words to my children as long as I can remember. Some things never change!

Moondance

Ugonna Anyaugo

Days turned into weeks,
And I am still intoxicated by
Her very sight.
The genesis was ironic,
Brutally colliding with her
In my haste for more knowledge.
Looking down with the perfect apology
Conceived,
I am met with a pair of eyes
Made to be on the same pedestal
With the world's most revered jewels.
Forgetting the existence of time,
I offer my trembling hand,
And speeding up my racing heart,
She accepted.

Locked in my private domain,
I am consumed by thoughts of her
And anxiously await the first rendezvous.
It was a night carved out by angels,
And she was to be a guest in my
Humble abode.
Lighting the scented candles holding down
The satin tablecloth,
The doorbell announced her
Beautiful presence.
I present roses promising origins
Of wet meadows, and
The returned smile rivaled
Perfection.

Christina Garvine

Similitude
Jaime Long

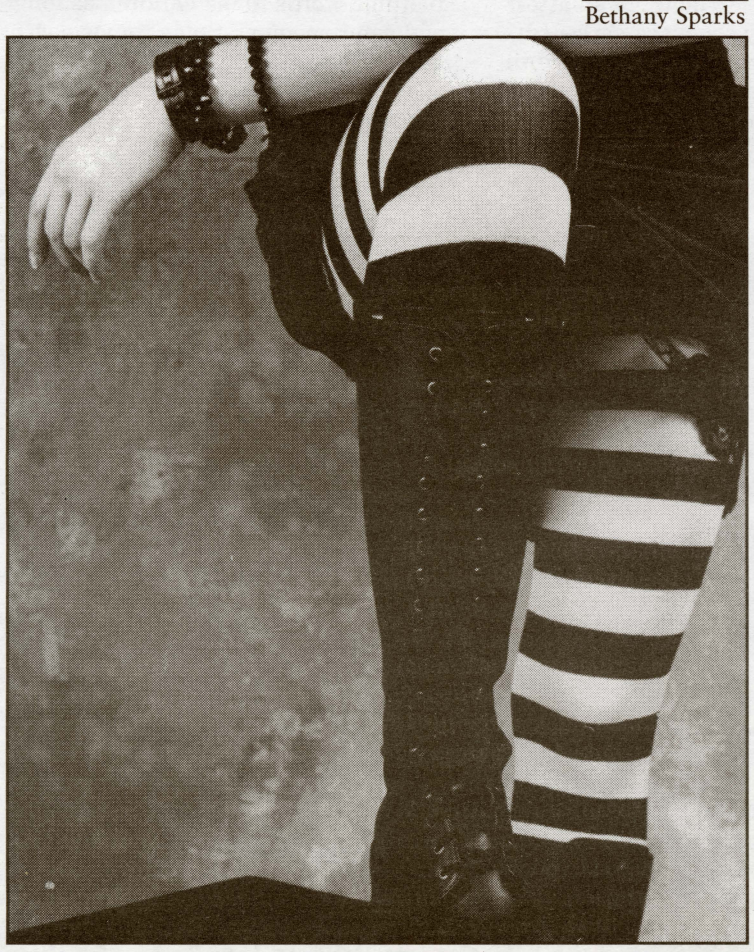
When needles prick me
I, too, bleed.
Like you,
I have dimensions,
I have corners,
I have boundaries.
You ask me why I love the touch?
I love the touch because I am human,
I am vulnerable.
And so are you.

When my heart gives in,
I, too, cry when it breaks.
Like you,
I have feelings,
I have emotions,
I do know how to love.
You ask me why I abuse the word?
I don't abuse it, love,
I avoid it.
And so do you.

When I smile for pleasure,
I, too, feel the ugliness inside.
Like you,
I have doubts,
I have trepidations,
I know what it feels like to be used.
You ask me why I go on giving myself?
I don't give myself freely,
I take in return.
And so do you.

When I hear words in my heart,
I, too, become petrified.
Like you,
I fear rejection,
I fear loneliness,
I don't want to be merely a number.
You ask me why I can't love you?
I need the touch,
and I want the lust.
And so do you.

Bethany Sparks



Elsa's Sin
Megan Pearrell

After seventeen years, the neon lights reflected on Elsa's window had ceased to look like stained glass. They had lost the magic she created for them, lost the innocence she had tried to attach to them. Now, they just looked like ugly, flashing sin, advertising peep shows and all-night liquor stores. The yellow, pink, and green shapes looked scary and dirty, and when it got dark outside, she felt unclean in her own room. When she was little, she would pretend that the lights protected her, that they made her room into a little church. She would sit on her sinking, too-soft bed reading Bible stories, singing hymns and pretending her graham crackers were communion wafers. But as she got older, she could no longer turn the corruption outside beautiful, and it got harder and harder for her to feel God inside her room. Or outside it.

She wasn't born Catholic. Her mother had no time for religion; working all night in various bars left her little time for spiritual pursuits. Elsa remembered her mother's reaction to finding her daughter alone on a Saturday night, reading her Bible.

"Elsa!!!!" Her mother's slurred scream made her jump. "Git down here. That book's fulla lies, go out with your friends. Don't you have any friends? Leave the damn Bible for Sunday." Her mother had been dressed in a tight, short red skirt (whore's red) and a black tank top. Her red lipstick was smeared and her black hose were run. A typical Saturday night for Elizabeth—Bets to her gentleman callers.

Elsa tried to ignore her. She had some vague memories of being taken to Sunday school by a long-dead grandma, but she couldn't really remember where or when her love affair with the Catholic Church started. Perhaps it was the romanticism of the religion, with its saints and ceremonies, and the wonderful practice of confession. She always felt slightly uncomfortable in the actual services. She thought perhaps her mother's lifestyle was known to these people, and they would judge her as well. Sometimes Elsa would watch the service, hidden, from the back of the church, but she used to make it to confession at least once a week. The priests were used to her by now. They did not know much about her, but they recognized her breathy, girlish voice and wistful confessions. She mainly went because she needed someone to talk to, someone who would not judge her. And she loved the idea of confession; the fact that she could do anything she wanted and still be forgiven, still be purged of that sin. Of course, she knew that was not exactly the way it worked, but that's what she liked to believe. And of course, she rarely had anything exciting to confess, since she had no life. But that had changed, hadn't it?

Elsa knew what her main sin was. She had been struggling with it for a year, ever since she met Matthew. One of her mother's "friends"—a fortyish man, very tall and very bald—had brought Matthew with him one time. "Uncle" Larry, as he liked to call himself, needed Elsa out of the way for a couple of hours, so he could "visit" with her mother. So he brought along his nephew, Matthew, to talk to her and keep her busy.

"She's a weird one," Larry cautioned his nephew. "One of them religious freaks, which is a joke considerin' her mother. Bets is the most unaffected woman in the world, helluva woman, and where she got that daughter is beyond me. The girl don't work, so whenever I come to visit Bets, Elsa just looks accusin', and goes into her room to play gospel music at top volume. She ain't much to look at, either. It ain't gonna be fun for ya, Matt, but I'll make it up to you."

Elsa didn't know much about boys, but from the moment she saw him, she knew Matthew was going to be the most important thing in her life. She didn't have much confidence in herself. Besides her mother, her biggest trial in life was her name. Elsa knew she had been misnamed. An Elsa should be a cool, tall thin blond, not a mousy little thing, with hair the color of mud, and gray, lifeless eyes. Elsa should drip self-confidence, and promise sex and money and all worldly pleasures. They should know what wine to order with dinner and what color lip liner went with Kelly green. She hated her name more than anything else. Her mother must have been either extremely hopeful or extremely drunk when she named her tiny baby daughter. She didn't know that her mother had once been a shy, wistful girl like herself, and that she had loved *Casablanca*. Elsa just knew her name did not fit. She didn't think she was being too hard on herself, only realistic. But for some reason, with her first look at Matthew, she had forgotten all of that. When she saw Matthew, she became beautiful.

"Hey." He had greeted her with effortless charm. Matthew was tall, with tousled blond hair and a body toned by soccer and lacrosse. He was easily the best-looking guy Elsa had ever seen, and the nicest.

"Hi," Elsa could barely manage a whisper.

"I know this is probably weird for you," Matthew said. "Your mom and Larry just kind of dropped me on you. But we'll have fun. Don't think I'm just doing my uncle a favor. I've seen you around. You're interesting. If I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't. Let's take a walk."

From that moment, Elsa was in love. Their walk was glorious. She spoke to Matthew—she didn't like the nickname Matt—about music, art and books. He told her about sports and his friends. Matthew wanted to be a writer. He loved the physicality of athletics, how they made him feel alive. But his mind needed the same kind of contact. He read constantly, and they admired many of the same writers. Elsa talked to Matthew about her mother, and about her need for God. He seemed to understand her in a way no one else ever had.

Elsa became drunk with love and passion. Like her religion, Matthew helped Elsa forget her mother's loud, late-night entrances and the bottles of scotch that filled the kitchen. They spent all their free time together. Her mother was glad—Elsa finally had a friend, and a boyfriend at that. Elsa blossomed under Matthew's care. She talked in class, went to the movies and watched Matthew's games. She was happy, something she never imagined. She still occasionally went to confession, but her heart had gone out of it. When she spoke to the priest, she told him how wonderful life was, how beautiful the world was. The sins she had been so afraid of no longer mattered.

After six months, Matthew talked Elsa into sleeping with him. It didn't take much. She was so in love, she was blinded to everything else. Before Matthew, sex was unimaginable; the biggest sin possible and a glaring

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representation of her mother. But with Matthew it was natural and right. She was afraid at first, and trembled the whole time. But Matthew was patient, and he held her and told her how much he loved her, that this was the most perfect moment of his life. Nothing in their love could be wrong. His words soothed her. Once she started, she couldn't get enough of him. Matthew joked about "my little nympho." She attacked their intimacy with the fervor she had once had for church. Matthew had become her new religion. But some nights, after he was gone, she would look at the crucifix she always wore and cry. She wasn't sure why, but sometimes the guilt was too much. Then she would roll over, go to sleep and dream about how much she loved him, and in the morning all would be forgotten.

Last night, she had a different kind of dream.

Everything was mist. Purply and soft, the mist surrounded her and created a moving cage all around her. She couldn't get past it, but she knew she had to; something was just right outside it. Matthew was right outside it. She couldn't see him, but she felt his presence, out of her reach. She knew she had to get to him; everything was good when Matthew was around. But the mist got thicker, turned into an impenetrable fog, and she couldn't see him or touch him. Gradually his presence, his feeling faded. And she was alone.

She woke up in a sweat. She needed to do something to make sure this never came to pass, that this was not her future. She often had weird dreams, but this one felt so real. She had been alone before, but with her taste of Matthew, she could not function without him now. If she lost him—

"Hey, sweetie." He sounded the same to her. Could the dream have been false, just her silly fears? "I know we're supposed to go to see that movie tonight, but I can't." Oh God. "I have some stuff to do for school."

"Can I help you? We could still hang out, just fake-let's-pretend-to-do-school-stuff hanging out."

"No, baby, then I wouldn't get anything done. I'm sorry; I was looking forward to it, too. But I'll call you tomorrow." Click.

Before the dream, this would have been fine. But the memory of it washed panic over her. She ran into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. After she calmed down, she sat on her bed, clutching her rosary and looking at the neon. It looked kind of pretty, for a change. She looked on her desk, at a framed picture of her and Matthew, kissing and holding hands. It was her prized possession. Next to it sat the leather-bound Bible her mother had bought her in a sober, caring moment. The juxtaposition was too great. She knew what her problem was: she felt like she had to choose. For the past six months her guilt had been building up, and since she never faced it, it never got better. The whole thing was ludicrous, God didn't make you choose between Him and love. Did He?

Elsa left her room. She walked in the cold, aimlessly at first. But of course she knew where she was going. In half an hour, she was there.

St. Joseph's loomed before her. It was an impressive structure, and it always took her breath away to see it. It was easily her favorite place in the world, and though it looked foreboding, she always felt safe, as if this was her real home. She went inside, and stood staring at the altar for a moment, and at the crucified Jesus before her. She crossed herself and entered a confessional.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been three months since my last confession."

"Yes, my child." The priest smiled to himself. He recognized Elsa's voice, and was pleased that she had come back.

"Father, there is no easy way for me to say this. I've been having premarital sex with my boyfriend."

"Go on."

"I know it's wrong, but I really don't think I'm going to stop. Oh, that sounds terrible, but it's true. I love him. I honestly believe that we will be married one day. I know that doesn't make it right, but—"

"What would you like me to say? You claim you will not repent."

"No, I don't repent, because it doesn't really feel wrong. I did feel a little guilty, but that didn't really stop me."

"Yes?"

"I realized why I felt so bad. I had this dream, and in it I couldn't find Matthew. And it worried me. I guess I feel like I can't really share this with him, and I can't share Matthew with God. Like I have two men in my life."

"And what does this mean for you?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I just wanted to come clean. With both of them. I want to ask Matthew to come to church with me sometimes, and I want God to know how much Matthew means to me as well."

"He knows."

"Yes. But this way I know. It feels better this way, like I'm finally being honest. Thank you, Father."

Elsa stepped out of the confessional and walked out of church. She looked at Jesus over her shoulder. He gave her the same peace he always did. She went home to call Matthew.

Claire Mullineaux

Kelly Storms

Lust
Jaime Long

Loneliness dripped off our bodies
as we entered the desolate room together,
intentions active,
desires fueled.
The silent, unspoken words
that leaked from our pores
like passion's sweat
made our senses aware of opportunity.
We embraced the bed with eagerness—
relieved that we were finally able to let go—
and lie solitary,
each of us with exposed skin,
slowly and magnetically coming closer together.
Your hands brushed my back delicately,
as if shielding me from any doubt,
pulling me closer and closer to your chest,
so that the emptiness inside me became satiated again.
You led me through turns and angles
never encountered before,
and I discovered a sanctuary in your body,
in your arms.

Smoking in the Cold
Ann Sosnowski

Hands shoved in the recesses
of my new hips,
feet pirouetted,
nineteen and confused.

Bodies pulse through the
river of the night
in our wintered triangle,

modeling the dance
of the northern lights
in silenced darkness

(his hands porcelain
his nose, apple peeled)

night euthanized by a
heavy mildew of
morning.

the moon glowering,
full and melted

shadowy,
smooth,
and porcelain.

Becki Blizzard

Savior
Ugonna Anyaugo

I am the reward of my mother's
phenomenal commitment to a great tribe.
Using only warm dedication,
she showered me with
intoxicating love,
taking me to the soft side
of the clouds.

The greatest of all earth mothers,
she is adored by white dynasties,
worshipped by underwater kingdoms.
Immersed in a fairy tale,
she rose, adorned in diamond jewels
from the Nile,
radiating hope.

It Takes More Than 9 to 5 to Keep Baltimore Alive
Meaghan Holland

Shock Trauma: to the lay person, these words alone often conjure images of mangled human bodies, broken bones, and torn flesh; the sounds of screaming, crying, and sobbing; and the pungent smell of fresh, crimson-colored blood, which soaks each bed and stains each floor tile. Although these aspects of the Center may nauseate most, as a nursing student, I found myself craving to work a summer job in the midst of these horrid surroundings. In an attempt to see if I was mentally capable of the job, my future employer, Veronica Daly, gave me an in-your-face look at the Shock Trauma Center during my job interview. At this time, I even imagined Veronica thinking to herself, "Can Meaghan really handle this place and all of its many sights, sounds, and smells?" Later, Veronica explained, "You know, Meaghan, one in eight citizens living in Baltimore City is addicted to heroin, and a majority of our patients are heroin addicts. At least 40% of our patients are HIV positive and/or Hepatitis B positive. Many are homeless and carry all sorts of parasites. We have to lock each unit because many altercations have occurred on the night shifts. At least half of the patients that come to us don't make it out, and many are only teenagers." She then asked rhetorically, "With all of this in mind, are you sure you want to work here?"

This challenge marked only the beginning of the many experiences I encountered as a member of the Shock Trauma team. And with these experiences and time, my initial impression of the cold and foreboding hospital and detached emotional perspective were transformed, and I became a more nurturing, compassionate person.

The Shock Trauma Center is a separate world. Although the perfectly square-shaped building resides next to the University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) on South Greene Street, only a dark, winding hallway connects the two buildings. As a new employee in my Shock Trauma-issued thin, pastel-pink scrub shirt and pants, I often walked through this hallway on the way to the Shock Trauma Center and imagined the hallway pleading to me, "Do you really want to go into this dreadful Center? Come on and turn around...go back to the lively, happy, light-filled rooms of the main hospital." I cringed when I walked through this corridor because I knew that I was about to enter an abyss, a place where the air grew increasingly thick with the stench of death, and where fear, anxiety, and sadness surged through the hearts of all who entered. As I neared the Center, I sometimes heard the chopping sound made by the Medevac helicopter's silvery metal blades as they sliced the city air to deliver a wounded patient from a motor vehicle accident or drug deal gone bad. I learned too quickly that the sound of the helicopter blades meant more mangled bodies from stab wounds to the back, or gun shots to the brain. This sound also indicated more tragedy for some innocent family living in a two-story house with a dog. I often thought, "What if this patient is someone I know, or even worse, a family member?" However, I returned to work each day. Too many nurses cried over their patients and this bothered me. Why would I choose to endure such heartache in an occupation that would require me to experience tragedy for many years? Thus, I erected a shield.

Nurses and doctors seeking perfection manage the Shock Trauma Center. They are determined that no patient will die until all possible efforts have been implemented. This is what the Center symbolizes; save those who would otherwise die somewhere else. And part of what permits this concept is how the nurses perceive their duty. I realize now that it is essential for the nurse to acknowledge her duty as providing care for the patient in a holistic manner and forming an emotional bond with the patient. This was the essence of what I lacked in my care until I met José in Room 12.

I felt numb the day I met José, like I did every day before. I first saw his mangled, comatose body, which looked to be no more than twenty, when I walked by his room at the beginning of a 12-hour night shift. He lay flat and naked in bed, with his arms at his sides, a white towel covering his genitals, and what seemed like millions of tubes entering and exiting his hairy, muscular, but lifeless, arms and legs. Except for the ventilator, which was covered with tiny yellow lights and knobs, and the many intravenous fluid machines, his room was bare. The only noise I heard was the continuous beep-beep-beep of his heart monitor, which would drive anyone mad, as it counted the rhythm of his abnormal heart rate. Where was his family? Why was he alone? Distraught by the thought of his dying alone, I moved the brown, plastic bedside table and the large ventilator to reach the side of his bed. Here, I grasped his dark hand, which was surprisingly silky smooth. I examined his young body and the shallow indentation in his chest formed by his heart muscle's relentless pumping. And I thought, "You were vibrant yesterday. Your brain functioned and you could smile, laugh, and cry. Where is that part of you now?"

The light bulb over his bed seemed celestial as it projected white rays on his exposed skin. I felt a supernatural presence fill Room 12, and the shield my heart hid behind started to crack. I began to cry and eventually tasted the salty liquid, which on any other day, would have signaled to me that I wascrying too much. However, I couldn't be emotionless with José. He was alone and needed all of me, including my emotional being. So, free from any restraints, I started to pray to José. I told him, "José, we love you. God is here and is carrying you." I talked with him that entire evening and even held his hands when he died, as life support was withdrawn eight hours after we met.

With José's death, I found myself a changed person. I was now free to express who I was and what I felt. I was no longer restrained from showing emotion, and I loved the new person I had become. That rainy evening, I survived a silent initiation into the Shock Trauma Team because I was able to give myself to a stranger who needed my

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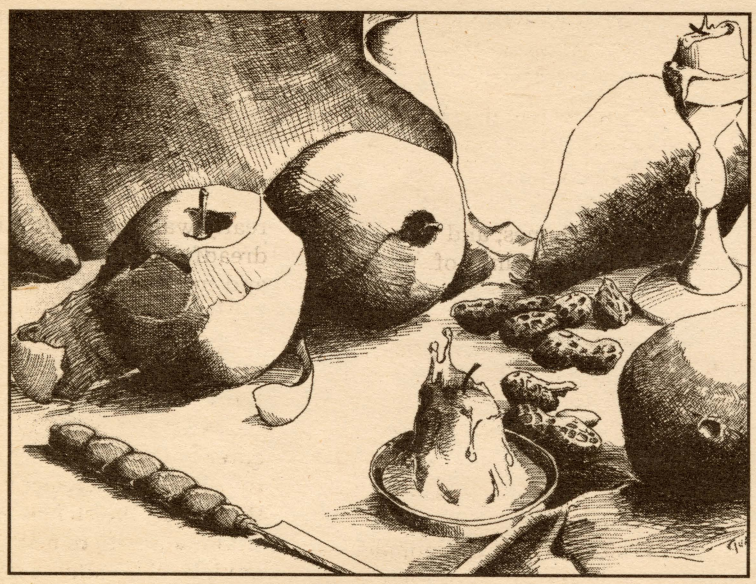
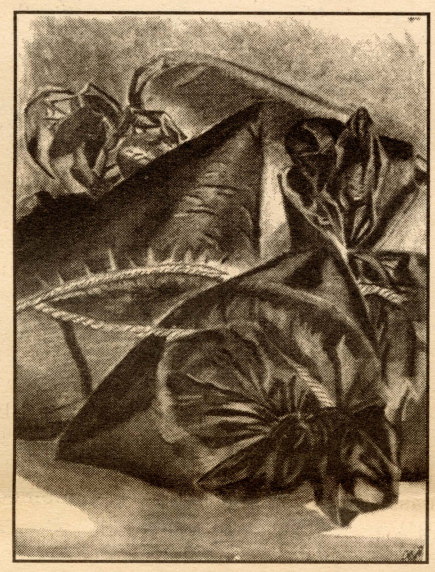
comfort. This is the epitome of what a Shock Trauma nurse must accomplish to be successful in a patient's eyes, even if that patient is comatose and brain dead. And just as the Center symbolizes hope for those who are dying, I felt proud because I, too, was a source of hope for my patients because I allowed myself to care.

The sights of bloody flesh, the smells of feces and dead bodies, and the sounds of monitors and people moaning and weeping didn't deter my interests in caring for the critically ill, and no other place could satisfy this yearning more than the Shock Trauma Center. Months after my initial interview with Veronica Daly, I can honestly answer her question as to whether I really want to work at the Center. And I am able to affirm, "Yes, Veronica, I am certain I want to be employed by you. The person I have become from my work here is someone I always desired to be, but had been too fearful to express. I am now the nurse that each patient deserves."



Mark Guariglia

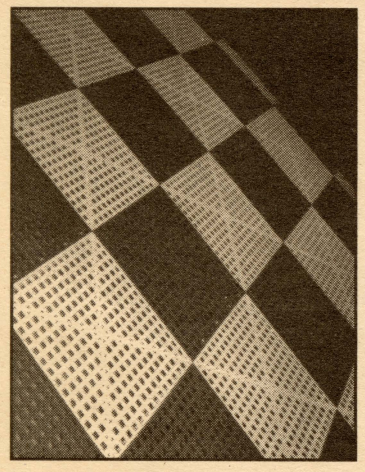


Jon Young

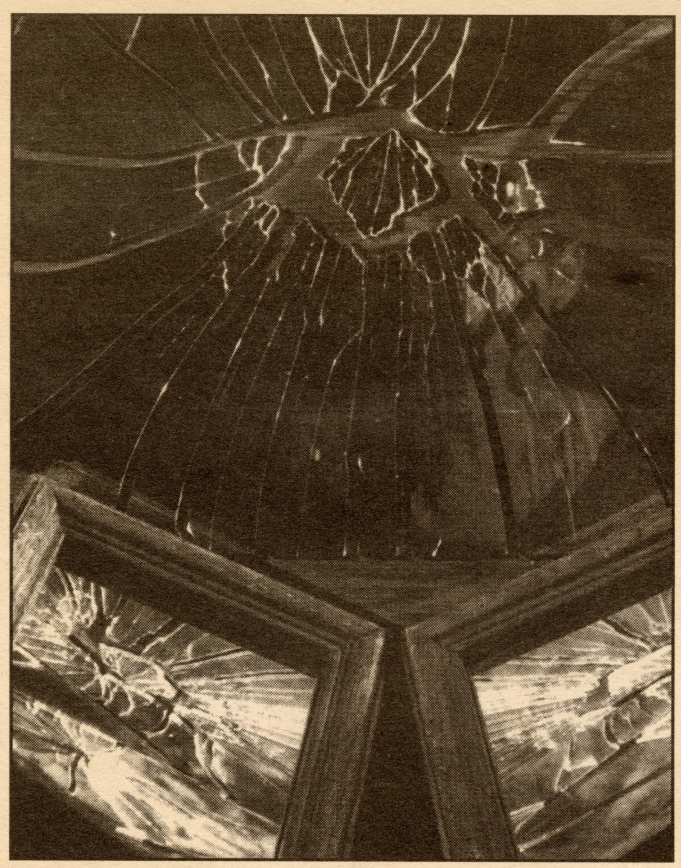
"Out of Place"

Eric Thanner

In gray they walk,
Two by two and I,
One out of step,
Tightly fit between your hands,
Low in thought.
Little movement of the hands,
Longing to be consumed, ended.
Trying to lie, only to stand again,
Prolonged to walk, step yet slowly.
In pain, this lie self-contained in frustration.
When will the time stop,
Swallowed whole in the plague.
And in pity the victims will
Question the source of the decay
And say it was out of shame.



Clint Sommer



Theresa White

I am the Limeman

Kevin Wisniewski

I am the Limeman,
Who cries not where God is not,
Who rises for no one,
And who feels no cold with the heat.

Spring longs for summer
As I long for my lost little girl,
A small breasted girl with a smile of silver.
I love you asleep by my side,

Watching you breathe
In rhythm with the night and
Rising with the sunlight
Bouncing from your hair.

The room burns passion and madness;
It was the scent that brought you here.
Yawning, you share that silk linen
Is soft on your stoned wounds.

Sliding on the inside, I laugh.
It's the way we collide like waves
Upon a shore and the way we connect,
Like springtime and flowers.

Some mornings I enjoy the stained
Visions of heaven razing through my spirit.
Others, I hide under my covers, but only
When the sun seems more powerful than I.

Never Said

Eric Thanner

What will never be said.
Lips, I can't possibly feel.
That is, a heart unfed.
Denied, a love remarkably real.
Together, although in two parts,
Friends only, a wish unspoken
In our time, burning rain departs.
Diamond eyes, a platonic token.
Seeing you, I long for peace
Of mind, let the bleeding quit.
Numbing me, pain does cease.
Defeat, I dare not admit.
In seasons, life rolls around.
Broken, my shell, love's torment found.

Once Upon Maternal Bliss
Zachary Riddle

Within her primal worldly womb,
The mystic birth began
As ruddy loins released the doomed
Into her fertile hand.

The naked babe sat quietly
In puddles of her dress
As lustful eyes made silent pleas
To nurse her ample breast.

A dimpled teat to quell the cry
Of early morning blur,
Let thirsty lips leave mother dry
And weary from the work.

An arid spring of withered worth,
Sweet Africa her name,
Forgotten mother of the earth
Whose children die the same.

Welcomed Perch
Kat Thorn

In the end there was the eagle
Wings like emaciated fingers
Tantalizing the wind
Mastering its secrets
She ascends
Drawn out—unyielding

To caress her
Ever lustful of her freedom

To taunt
Tease the air

Plummeting
The terrestrial sphere
Accosted by his authority
An ever present Hiss

His adamantine beak spits love
Suppressing her flesh
With the weight of his own

(Eagles sometimes use their wings to beat prey)

Feathers strewn–forgotten
Abandoned

She is made clumsy
Sharp hooks
Rupturing flesh
A lover's violent caress

(Eagles mate for life)

The captivity of love

Waiting for the wind
To hoist the fragments of her frame

There is relief in water

Death
A welcomed perch

Fifty Ways to Abuse Candy
Christa Adle

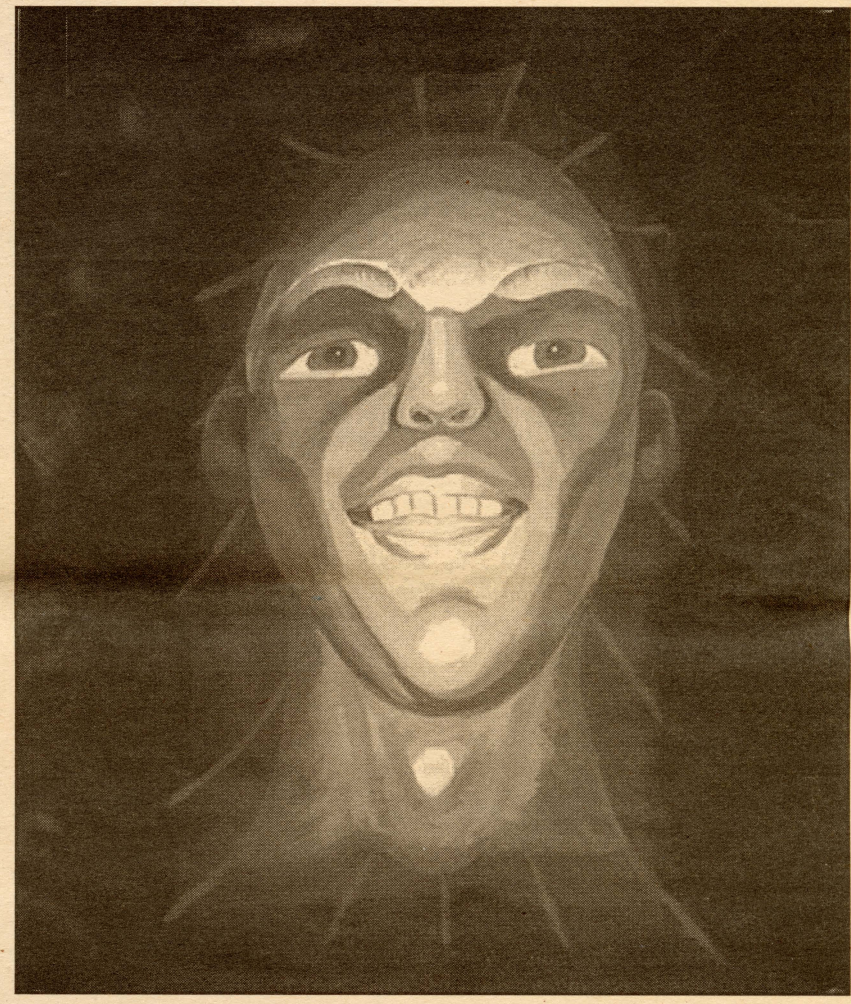
Fifty pills in the childproof bottle. Makes funny noise when cheap white container is shaken side to side and then upside down, like the tube kids have that's supposed to sound like the rain. Was skeptical of rain in a tube then. Now not so sure. Shiny blue-coated tablets pour out. Look clean and reflect the dim light from the overhead lamp. Mouth waters like a thirsty kid standing outside in a summer shower, bare feet running over slick grass, tongue out ready to catch elusive droplets. Sit, stare. Can *feel* small hands innocently outstretched, eyes closed, dripping palms turned up to the sky. Sit, stare. Long for that dizzying rain dance, tremble anticipating the blue reflective droplets poured from the fake-rain bottle.

Stay focused: Line them up, touching end to end, they edge halfway around the table. Discard empty bottle to floor. Excitedly grab the next. Fumbling, the lid finally pops off of the dark orange RX bottle. Looks like a film canister. Sort of. Pink tablets land on the table and scatter. Continue colorful table border. Coming along quite nicely now. More meds are greedily dumped on the table with unsteady fingers. Shaking with excitement. A rainbow assortment of uppers and downers and no drowsy, anti-itch, pain relieving, cholesterol reducing, muscle relaxing, over the counter-only by prescription fix-it-alls. Rainbow assortment of rainbow rain, fractured color and light that lasts for too few precious seconds then fades away. Mismatched containers and lids and cotton puffs lay scattered and abandoned on the floor, resting at feet. No need to clean them up. Realization: The future doesn't go that far anymore.

Elusive and delicate, who knows where a rainbow may appear? Take advantage of them when they're spotted. Well, smart enough to see that the rainbow on the table is magnificent. (Such a smart cookie in such an empty shell.) Sigh. Side by side the coveted goodies go around and around and around the table making smaller and smaller and smaller squares. Would be a shame not to take advantage of this particular woman-made, woe-man rainbow. Maybe it is just a cheap nickel-and-dime, paint-by-number optical illusion? Look long enough into the multi-color pill pattern and see the man in the moon staring right back at you with sad yellow-brown ibuprofen eyes. Where's the beginning of this pill-border puzzle? Realization: Once you begin there's no going back.

This is for keeps.

Stay focused: Follow the bread crumb trail of pills and one by one they slide down your throat. Glad you got a big glass of water. Don't want to get up once this is begun. Oh my Ms. Pacman, you've already begun chomp chomp chomping around one edge of the incredible edible table, onto the next, beginning your journey through the forest. Stay on the trail, steady—one by one making your way home.



Jason Knauer

Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. The supply is endless. Dilemma: can anyone *really* swallow this many goodies? How many licks to the center of the tootsie-pop coated candies; how many pills to the center of me? Arms get heavy but not done yet. Soon enough, but not quite yet.

Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. Eyelids droop, breathing slows. Shadows grow, warm air to cold.

Swallow gulp. Swallow gulp. Water gone? Sounds fade out, color to gray. Why does it always rain on me?

Swallow gulp. Almost done, almost home. Fingers motionless, mind numb. Sigh escapes, fading away. Gray to black, black to white.

Swallow. Gulp. Vague sounds, garbled voices, sirens roar—silence rushes in.

Sit, stare, longing for that dizzying rain dance. Tremble and absorb the blue reflective droplets poured from the fake-rain bottle—dissolving brainwaves, microwaves, heartwaves, oceansprays, x-rays, and chicken soup for my soul-soundwaves.

And she fell away: Gone

Imaginary City

Jason Dittrich

To William Blake, And may he live in his Imagination, Forever.

"*Sssshhhh*... you see that woman? Sitting over there on the curb? With red lipstick, blonde hair, and a white T-shirt? You don't see her? Well, I do. I know her. That woman. Over there sitting on the curb all curled up like an onion. What does she look like, you say? Like an abandoned child who has strayed away from home? Or like a leaping doe caught in the keen headlights of a car? Lost. Forgotten. Possessed. Destroyed. Forever. Her. She. That woman. I can see right through her.

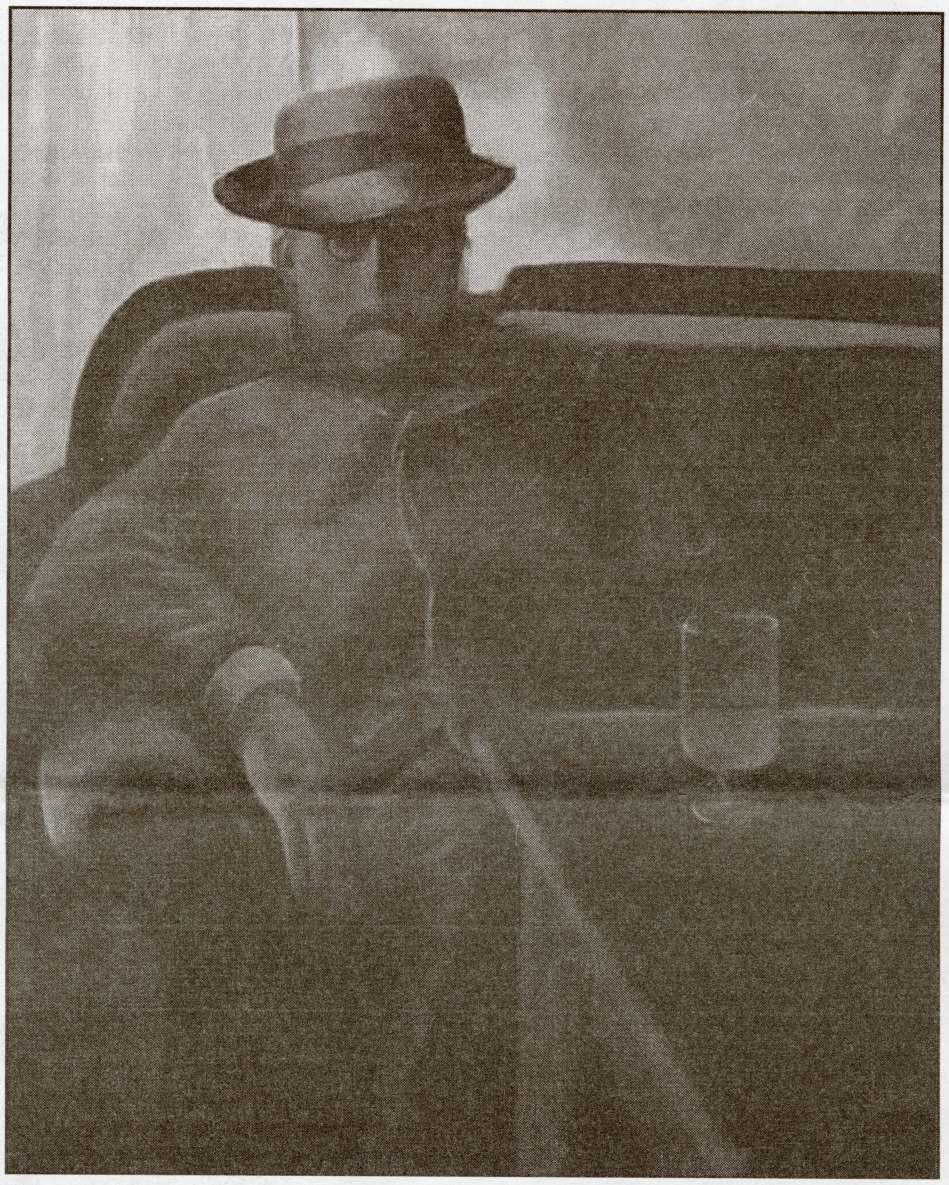
"She lives on the corner of Parcel Street presumably with her dead husband buried in the basement, and I wonder sometimes how she can possibly tolerate that smell. Of course, it has never been confirmed, neither by her or anyone else, that her husband lies dead under her floorboards. No dark mysterious vans have been observed exiting the back alley—if so, I would have seen them, for I live adjacent to her house. We do not even know her name, and I have no desire to give her one, for what is there to gain? The enigma surrounding her is built from a series of speculations, as if they are the only things we are good at. It is my job as her neighbor to merely listen to these exaggerated idiosyncrasies and sentence them to reality. In that case, I doubt many are *actually* true."

He watches from his bedroom window with wistful eyes and she is the focus of his attention. Her body casts a shadow illuminated by the sonorous sun, as if it is a map bent on his knees. An utter fixation has presented itself, and he dare not look away—as if he has a choice. Soon she shall return to her house and he will step away. The clouds shift and her hair blows with the current of the wind, and he wonders if it is not a *loathing* that he feels toward her. He hopes not, for it is today that everything is perfect, and he can forget all of the rumors.

Those rumors were quickly spread once the disappearance of Mr. _____ was revealed. The boy was five at the time when he first heard of this story, and his youth exposed his naive nature, for he didn't know any better. Or worse. His time was consumed with puerile fantasies: the key to his world in that particular shift of his heart and mind. But he quickly grew older and could no longer deny, or supply, the ambiguities that confounded the neighborhood. He slowly investigated with his eyes, ears, and mouth, all the while developing an intimate relationship with Mrs. _____ (or is it now Ms. _____?). The police, many recall, visited a few times late at night, but they retreated empty handed hours later. He often witnesses her smoking cigarettes while sitting on the curb venting her frustrations. On those fastidious nights he yearned to sit with her; he could kill himself for just *one* of her cigarettes.

Many years passed and no evidence ever surfaced. To this day she has remained silent, as if that is her only defense.

Her house sits on a hill: separated, secluded, and drawn in. It is a stranger, plastered on the corner, separated from its neighbors as if



Kelly Storms

distance is its oasis. The cracked windows represent a web of past memories long since shoved underground. The bricks are damp and faded, their foundation *too* much of an unfortunate recurring theme. Green vines lace the walls and they choose not to die during the winter months while stretching for a higher power (hidden inside?). On the porch, a wooden rocker shifts with every breath the air releases and ceases with every cough, as if a ghost is in control. The cracked paint resembles a Mad Painter with dark blotches engraved, not sealed. Inside, the picture of Mr. _____ hangs on the wall with an inconspicuous smile, yet his eyes are envious and full of shame. One clock exists in the entire residence and it is not reproachable, for its hands are tied. The carpet is layered like a drawn road; cutting every corner, every crevice, every hole into a stream of rejoiceless wings. The curtains are closed and they remain that way, holding the secrets as hostages captured by an unrepentant soul. Where the front commences, the back concludes, and that is its intention.

"Three winters ago she left and didn't return for two weeks. I saw her exit with two suitcases into a yellow taxicab that soared down the street. It was an inscrutable automobile, preserved by its boiling yellow paint with neither license plates nor distinguishable markings. It jetted from the corner as if it was flying, surrendering to the air as it traveled into the prosperous distance. I believe I was the only one to witness this, for even now when I recall that brisk morning I quickly repress the memory—who would believe me, anyway? I have nothing to reveal. But the truth.

"I know you believe me. Don't you? You see her, yes? No? Why not? She is still sitting on the curb. I have not moved my eyes away, as if I possibly could. Why can't you see her? You don't *know*? Tell me, why? You just don't understand. You don't understand *her*, that's all. Like everything in life, time is everything. Over a period of time you'll understand why she is *everything* to me. I simply didn't realize it at first, and you don't now so it's understandable. It took me a while to see her. To see the mysteries locked in her closets and honestly confront the truth hidden deep inside the vaults of silence. One day, I visited her house.

"I watch from my window with wrenching lasciviousness just as I did that day she left, and, if my recollection serves me, I entered under the distinct impression I was a mischievous stalker, although now I look at it differently: with a lucid and competent mind, for I knew not the facts I now know about my arcane neighbor, and I intend for her secrets to remain within me. I cannot betray. I refuse to betray her. I *won't* betray her."

He surreptitiously crept from his room down into his basement, permitting his feet to palpate the cemented floor and his hands gather moisture circumventing the maniacally painted walls. A monotonous pulse inside his chest quickly accumulated momentum as his eyes stared transfixed into the darkness. He felt inside himself a long hollow yearning and the opening of a gate. His feet slid to the door and his fingers completed the rest. The sun glared into the basement. Light for all to see. It was in fact a sight to behold and magically, curiously, wonder about. The rising of the clouds earned the sun second place as darkness stepped in, and he closed the door behind him. He had forgotten his key.

First, a glance to the left and then the right, for eyes could have been watching. A glance, now, behind him and to the front for safe measures of course. A man walking up the street alerted him, and he quickly hid behind a tree. It was now a game, one he had not participated in before, and there were no rules to his knowledge; therefore, the boundaries were open, and danger loomed in the distance. The rules would have to wait. His eyes glowed against the darkness, and the man's footsteps could no longer be heard. The boy now stepped from his hiding place and walked to the pace of the wind, which carried him to her back door. He pushed his sleeves up his elbows and flexed his fingers against his knees. This, he knew, was right.

In the beginning, he looked as far as he could see through the meshed glass window next to her back door. Nothing. But that, for him, was not enough. Far from enough, for he took hold of the doorknob now and embraced it tenaciously, gnawing his lips. The nudge is what finally did it in, and the door surrendered much to his belated joy.

He first observed a violin positioned on a chair, cuddled against a blue

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stained pillow in the corner of the room, attempting to hide from the outside world. Apparently, this was her kitchen, or what remained of it anyway. A sink to the right and a table to the left and nothing more. No cabinets, no silverware, or plates and glasses. The room of nothingness revealed just that: the impractical impotence of her daily life consumed behind a leaking faucet, with no dishes. He knew this once he left and walked into a narrow hallway with her pictures as his companions. They were decorated in black and white, all with tangible backgrounds. Many held firm to his, eyes for a table was lit midway. He remarked in one frame a gathering of children under a tree, in another on a beach, and in another on an endless field. Others retained captive only two people, both young with their perpetual smiles and suave skin tones. Only

LyAnne Stillson

a few revealed a man with perfectly parted hair, wearing a dark suit cut around his shoulders as if it had been tailored to accommodate his brawny body. None showed a woman that appeared to be the now Ms. _____, and he wondered why—was there a reason? Possibly. Perhaps? Maybe. Actually? No.

The house slowly revealed itself to him like the picking of a scab from his leg or arm. Personal. His eyes glinted from wall to wall, room to room, and evidence meticulously collected in his mind. In the living room was a mahogany grandfather clock shaded by the gray dust that had accumulated over the years. Only two of its three hands functioned properly, as if the other one had been cut off—but by whom? And when? He distinguished a key. Nothing unusual except for its shape, and that itself wasn't *too,* quaint for it matched the hole in the back door. But the boy did not know this. Or, at least not yet. He attempted to turn the key, but it would not, and he gave up. The first time of many.

He walked up the wooden stairs to the top floor and observed her bedroom. This time he searched her drawers and felt her living clothes, immaculate ironed sheets, and intimate garments. He imagined her body standing at the doorway, spying on him, as if she had joined his game. He enjoyed it. Or at least fantasizing about it as he viewed his face in her mirror next to her bed. He smiled and ran his hands through his light, brown hair.

Suddenly, a sound erupted from within the room. He hastily turned and noticed a miniature porcelain doll on her night table releasing a charming melody of simplicity and splendor. Age had faded its colors, and the sun didn't help either. He stood aghast at its sensuous beauty. It resembled a model of her, a perfect one at that, with its features resembling her, and its blue eyes glistening evenly in the darkness. He left the house with the silent, porcelain figurine in his pocket. A remembrance that he took with him from his first visit.

"That intimate feeling has returned just now, in fact, as I hold her in my hand. I watch her from a distance, and I know her as half blood, half skin. She is a comfort, sitting alone on the curb of the street, safe and shielded from outsiders. Sunset approaches and night waits. The City has planned a social at the Polish Home Hall in two hours. I am expecting her to be there, and she the same in return. I am dressed for the occasion, wearing my best navy jacket (for she deserves only the best) and a light blue shirt with white buttons. My pants are frothy beige and my feet are consoled with black leather shoes; my now dark, brown hair is freshly cut and my face meticulously shaven. I pamper my body, and I am sure she will arrive soon after eight o'clock: the official time set three months ago.

"It is a *gathering* with people accommodating people, wearing their fancy dresses and expensive suits; dates clutching each other like glue on paper. I arrive shortly before eight and stand in the corner, waiting with nervous palms tucked closely in my pockets, and a tightening knot spinning in my throat. The words, I assume, will arrive with Ms. _____, and I doubt I will have a lack of them, for I have so much (very much) to say to her. I wait now. That is all. That is all I can, and will, do."

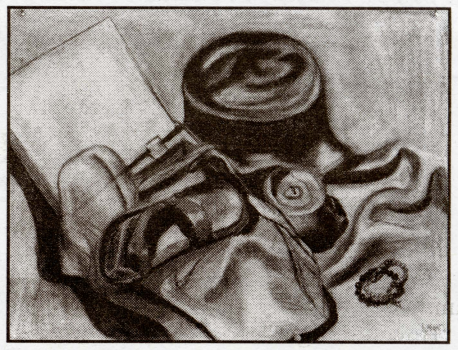
At ten o'clock he sits on the Polish Home Hall steps observing the stars circling above, and the moon shining into the corner of his right eye. He is disappointed, nonetheless, for she did not show—but he was so positive of himself. What possibly could have changed her mind? Maybe she found out? —Yes! About his unexpected visit during her absence and his search through her personal things. But *how* could she have found out? Was she watching him? He bows his head in shame (like the picture of Mr. _____) and loosens his tie as the music continues behind him, without him. He taps his left foot on the cement, pretending the sound is of her footsteps behind him, near him, next to him, and then with him. He waits for her for two hours, but it is longer than that. He has waited for her ever since he was five, and isn't that enough punishment? He assumes, now, tomorrow she shall arrive, and he will wait for her then, too. Forever, it seems, he will wait. But he has given up too soon, for he feels her next to him, and she sits with unpretentiousness.

Her stay is brief as she places the key from the mahogany grandfather clock in his hand. He feels her sensuous touch. His mouth is open and body motionless. She is a glowing figure, appearing as though a child of the moon and all its glory. She sees his eyes and wonders, why is he so afraid? She then gropes for his sullen, burly hand and understands he is no longer a boy. A man. She releases his hand and walks down the street, leaving him alone on the steps with a story to tell.

"I hold her key in my right hand. The key to her house, the key to her life, and the key to all her mysteries. The key to my own life, house, and mysteries as well. I promise to thank her later tonight when I shall use the key for the very first time. I promise not to be afraid. I wonder now, what I will do with my life. Be with her? Yes. Stay with her? Yes. Take care of her? Yes. And, love her everyday.

"I stand to observe her fade into the darkness, swallowed into the bliss of night. Well, I think, one thing is for sure: I live in an imaginary city, not my own."

A few days later the house disappears unexpectedly. It sinks into the ground, stealthily consumed from below. All that remains is softened earth and stubbles of green grass. He observes this from his window, his face imprinted on the glass. It is raining, and harsh gray clouds have erased his name. No longer can he see her, or feel her, or think of her. He has lost his power; the will, the strength to feel his blood travel, and thus so, too, he has lost his imaginary city and all its occupants. He waits now for the dream that will lead him to another place. Maybe this time near a mountain, by a lake, with a bluish distance? It all remains unfinished, but when it arrives his journey will begin all over again.



Lauren Hunt

Getaway Girl

Jaime Long

I knew it was the night
for someone to win

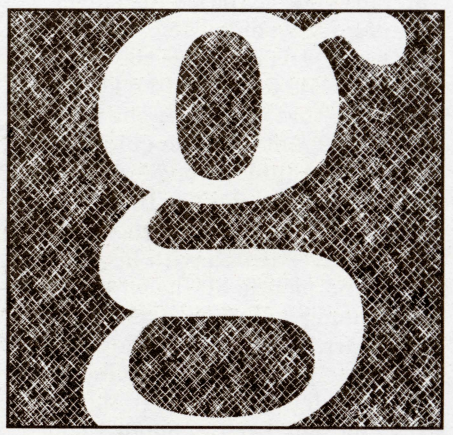
so I was suspicious when he
gave me a sapphire
laced with white gold.

I sat on the uncoated,
dirt-covered hardwood floor
unable to respond
in sweet tones.
The absence of monogamy
held his palms to the floor,
and my words on my tongue.
Still,
he tried to secure my independence
with slippery words,
like "marriage" and "children."
How frivolous my hand was
in accepting the ring,
when my eyes were looking away
at the football game on television,
where there were boundaries
and rules.
How dare he think I was ready to stop,
ready to end the game!

I sat there,
fingering tomorrow in my hands,
and resisting the temptation
of running him down,
stealing the prize,
and making my getaway
with an Olympic runner's pace.

But I was the Getaway Girl,
running from a guarantee.

Bonnie Leonard



Blind Hearted
Tim Apicella

V

"Did you hear what happened to her?"

"Are you talking about who I think you are?"

"Yeah. Anyway she went out with him."

"How did it go?"

"After they went ice skating, they ended up at his house."

"Wait a minute, that doesn't sound right."

"Yeah I know. I didn't believe it either. Anyway she tried to have sex with him and he told her to leave."

"How did she take that?"

"My sister told me that, *she...was... devastated.*"

"Excellent."

IV

"So where are you two going?"

"He said something about going ice skating. Isn't that cool? Most guys just want to go to the movies or something stupid like that. Guys are so generic. But Blane Stark isn't like most guys He is *so* perfect."

"Earth to Emily, you can come back down out of the clouds now."

"Whatever girl, you know how hot he is. He's prettier than you and me combined." Emily opens up her closet and dives in.

"I am beautiful, and you, Em, *you* were Miss Harmony County."

Emily hops out of the closet holding up a pair of black flare pants. "That was like two years ago." She holds the pants up to her waist. "I can't even fit in the same clothes I used to wear. I'm getting so fat."

"Oh shut up."

"Lucy, what if I just keep getting bigger and bigger till I end up like my mother. I'm already 20 and my butt is starting to look like a pumpkin. And who will want me then?"

Lucy stands up and snatches the pants out of Emily's hands. She places them on her own hips and looks at herself in the mirror. "So Ben hooked you guys up huh?"

"Yeah, isn't he great."

Lucy closes her eyes and spins. "I know, Ben is the sweetest guy in the world."

Astonished, Emily rolls her eyes and says, "Ben!? Please, I was talking about Blane. Ben is just a... a friend."

"Easy for you to say, you live next door to him. You're so lucky. You get to watch him walk around without a shirt on and you get to watch him wash his car."

"Yuck! Please stop, this is Ben we're talking about. He's like a brother to me. And speaking of brothers, I don't believe you dumped my brother for Ben."

Lucy throws the pants back in Emily's closet and looks out the window at Ben's house. "I went out with Jeremy for three years, and he never once held the door for me or pulled out my chair or anything. It's just the little things like that that mean so much to a girl. Jeremy should have treated me like a goddess. Instead he treated me like an old dog. He had no sense of romance and Ben is just so... *romantic.*"

Emily sits down with Lucy, "Can we not talk about Ben right now, on Friday night I am going out with the hottest guy in Harmony county."

"Whatever makes you happy, Em."

"This is going to be the best night of my life."

III

"So you like him huh?"

"Who?"

"That guy from the mall, you know who I'm talking about Em. His name is Blane."

"How do you know that?"

"A little birdie told me."

"Who told you that Ben!?"

Walking across his porch towards her, Ben says, "I just heard it somewhere. Anyway I talked to him about you."

Slamming her car door shut Emily says, "BENJAMIN WALKER! I'm gonna kill you!"

"You wanna know what he said about you?"

She sets her bag down on the roof of her car, "He talked about me?"

Ben leans over the rail. "No lie, he said you were cute and that he'd like to go out sometime."

Red in the face she says, "Ben if you're lying to me, I swear I'll kick your butt. Are you sure he meant me?"

"Unless there's another Emily May Belfor that lives next door to me." Emily smiles with the brightness of a thousand suns. "I can hook you guys up if you want me too."

Emily runs across Ben's yard and up his steps and hugs him. Like a little girl on Christmas morning she says "You would do that for me?"

"Just remember who hooked you guys up."

Emily kisses him on the cheek, "I'll never forget this Benny. Oh I gotta go tell Lucy about this. She'll be so excited."

II

"Have you ever told her how much you care about her?"

"Are you joking!? She would totally spaz out. This is Miss Harmony County 1996 you know. This is the prom queen. This is my dream girl. She's way out of my league. She doesn't even know I exist anymore."

"Dude, are you kidding. I'm your best friend and *she* knows you better than I do. Ben, you should just go ask her out."

"I can't do that."

"Why not, you wuss?"

"Jeremy, she's only the most beautiful creature in existence."

"Please man, I don't want to hear this, that's my sister you're talking about. She might be attractive, if you like that sort of thing, but looks aren't everything to look for in a girl."

"We've got history dude. We played peewee soccer together, we used to go to beach every summer with each other's families, we played in the same playpen when we were little..."

"OK, OK, I get it."

"I just don't see why the good guys never get the girls."

"Ben, it's because anything that isn't somewhat of a challenge for them is boring. Girls always want something new and dangerous and good guys are so... plain."

With a surprised yet at the same time hurt voice, Ben turns of the TV, gets off his couch and says, "*I* am *not* plain! I have a nice car, I have... nice teeth, I have..."

"Yeah. Whatever. Dude, you drive a *Volvo*. You were in the marching band in high school. You're 20 years old and you still live with your mom. You've had the same haircut since you were four years old. You probably still wear your cowboy jammies to bed. Emily has known you her whole life and will never fall for you unless you show her that you are different from the rest of the guys. You can still be nice, but you gotta act cool too. You can start by turning the TV back on."

With a confused look much like that of a deer staring into the headlights of an oncoming car, Ben looks up at his friend, tosses him the TV remote and answers "What do you want me to do Jeremy? Tell me, all-wise all-knowing god of everything. Where do I go from here?"

Jeremy sits down, turns on TV, and happens to find a fashion show. "You're not going to overwhelm her with your lackluster looks or dimwitted charm." Painfully, Ben says, "Thanks, ass!"

With a half grin Jeremy flips through the TV channels and replies, "I can say that 'cause I'm your friend.

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Newlyweds
Theresa White

I
Whore.
There it is.
The lyrical insult.
The word itself an ugly kiss, open-mouthed and hollow.
May I claim it as my own?
No, you read my bruises like a fortune teller.
You would know if someone else touched me, intimate or rough.
Bitch is the word you spit at me most,
your voice scarring the closed quiet of afternoons
with the bitter taste of venom.

II
Will you send me dancing
clumsily toward some momentary darkness, or will you
ask me to coax the anger from your body
with gentle hands?
There is still enough lust between us to pass for love.

III
You are my angel -
but Michael,
or Lucifer falling, his golden wings on fire?
Sunlight catches in the window screen as the plate explodes
against the kitchen floor,
against our feet and legs damp with noon
day sweat. We stand wooden and unbalanced, holding air
in our curled fingers, in our startled lungs.
It will be months before you and I stop washing
glass from our skin.

IV
My exquisite serpent, where do you hibernate?
Would you teach me the art of holding autumn's
unpredictable heat all through winter?
I get cold sleeping alone in January.

V
The angel of death is singing *mercy* in my dreams.
Only the cries of my daughter
lift the heavy quilt of his wings.

Matt Russell

continued from page 11

Besides I was only half serious. "

Stunned and glassy-eyed, Ben asks, "*OK,* I understand. But I don't know what to do. You're her brother; you've got to know something. Can't you put in a good word for me or something?"

Jeremy turns, looks at Ben, and cracks a half smile. "You know, I've got a better idea. Although it won't solve your problem now, Emily will be very grateful if you do her a big favor."

"What kind of favor? I'd do anything to make her happy."

Jeremy rolls his eyes. "I had a feeling you'd say that. Anyway there's this guy that she likes. But he doesn't know she likes him."

Ben sits down and says, "Jeremy, I don't like where this is going."

"Hear me out. I can get that guy to go out on a date with her. If you hook her up, she'll be so grateful to you. She'll love you for it and she'll think you're cool because you know him."

Ben hesitates for a moment. "Who's the guy?"

Jeremy stands up and excitedly replies, "It's this guy Blane. He works at the mall."

"Where at the mall?"

"At one of the booths in the middle, right outside of the food court."

"I don't think I know him. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Jeremy stares Ben dead in the eyes and grabs his hands. "Buddy, you can trust me. Believe me it'll work. I know my sister and she will love you for it."

"She gets home from work at around four tomorrow. I guess I'll talk to her about it then."

I

"You know why she broke up with you don't you Jeremy?"

"Why? Enlighten me dude."

"She dumped you for Ben."

"You got to be kidding me."

"Oh you're cute honey, but you aren't chiseled in stone, if you know what I mean."

"Reggie, that's not it. If she wanted to dump me, that's fine. I don't care. I just don't know what she sees in him that she doesn' t see in me."

"Look we both know how Lucy is. We both know how all women are. They want one thing and five minutes later they're done with that and they want something else. Girls are so fickle. Sugar, that's why I needs me a man."

"I'm sorry but I just don't think I can swing that way Reggie. Anyway, *don't* change the subject! This is messed up!"

Holding the phone a small distance from his ear, Reggie whispers, "Look I wish there was something I could do but I can't."

"I bet Ben's been coming on to her the whole three years she and I went out."

"You can't talk about your best friend that way Jeremy."

Jeremy snaps back into the receiver, "Ha! Best friend!? He is *not* my best friend. Best friends wouldn't go behind your back and try to steal your soul mate away from you. Besides, you've been a better friend to me in the three years I've known you anyway."

"True. He *is* a bit trifflin' sometimes." Replied Reggie in a light-hearted voice.

"Reggie, *he* is a loser! He can't even make up his mind about who he's in love with." Half hyperventilating and half in a psychotic rage, Jeremy sputters out the words, "It was bad enough that he's in love with Emily, but now Lucy too."

"Oh don't bring your sister into this. Lucy is my sister and I never got on you about dating her. I was even cool about it when I found you two having sex in my car. I should have bitch-slapped the both of you, but I let it slide. I let it go because I understood. Love hath no boundaries, my friend."

"But that's different Reg."

"How is that different?"

"Two ways actually. First of all, she isn't my sister. She is my *step* sister.

"Close enough."

"Not really, my dad hates me and he loves her to death. When mom died, so did everything he felt for me. I moved out of the house and he didn't care. Then he met his new wife and her perfect kid, and now all he cares about is his little doll. Well, fuck you, dad!"

"OK. Calm down. I get it. Anyway you had a second answer."

Jeremy snidely remarks, "Cause you're gay."

"Oh please, you act like that's a bad thing. Honey, I may like boys, but I *am* still human." Pausing and thinking for a second, Reggie eventually says, "You should try it sometime. I know someone who has a crush on you."

"I'm gonna hang up if you tell me you're in love with me, Reggie. I've had a stressful day and I don't need this right now."

Reggie immediately responds, "Please, don't flatter yourself. I'm saving myself for Ricky Martin. I'm talking about someone else."

Jeremy scratches his head and questions, "Who?"

"Well, you have to promise not to tell anyone I told you this."

"You're the only true friend I have anymore. Who would I tell?"

"You know that guy who works at the piercing pagoda at the mall?"

"Ha! You mean that guy Blake?"

"Actually his name is Blane, but that's close enough."

"Oh I know him. My sister talks about him all the time. She's like in love with him or something." Instantly the cogs in Jeremy's mind start to grind. "Wait, I've got an idea, but I need your help."

"What you schemin' boy?"

"It'll mess with everyone who pisses me off."

"I don't know, man, that sounds pretty shady."

"All you gotta do is get Blane to go out with Emily one night," says Jeremy with an evil sense of delight. "I'll do the rest."

"I still don't get it."

"I'll tell Ben to hook up Emily and Blane. Emily and Blane will go out and Blane won't be attracted to her. Emily will be heart-broken. She'll be mad at Ben for hooking them up. She'll tell Lucy about it. Then Lucy will be pissed off at Ben for setting up her friend for disappointment. Ben will be torn from the inside. It'll be perfect."

Amy Behlke

Becki Blizzard

Old Man and the Moon

Daniel R. Sadler

Old man in his rocking chair
Sits out in an open field.
With his dog at his side,
He feels secure in a land without borders,
Running a hand down the back of his friend.

It's half past twelve
And his wife is home sleeping,
But he just can't help staring into the night.
He leans to the left, squinting an eye,
Swearing to himself that the moon has a face.

As a boy so small, his mother told him stories
About shooting stars and the man in the moon.
Gray and bent, a young puzzled look now rests on his face
As he tries to reason with that big glowing smile,
Staring down from the sky, mocking the dark.

His dog gives out a sigh,
He's been through this before,
But he doesn't bother bumping his master's leg.
Curling comfortably, his breath keeps rhythm
With rocking chair creaks and the chirping crickets.

The old man stays up
Because he slept all afternoon
And he waves a finger at the face in the sky.
He swears to himself that the moon wants to play,
So he puts hands to his ears and sticks out his tongue.

Yes

Olivia Bitting

I couldn't see the sun, but it had strength enough to allow the wearing of T-shirts. It was a Wednesday; I'm sure of it because I was about to meet Louise for our short break before we both went to Philosophy, which we took only once a week. Sydney wore a plain white T-shirt and my sleeves were long as I walked into the thick air of early evening to discover her smoking on my campus. I briefly envied her sleeves before I turned to wondering what was in store for Louise, what things Sydney would say or do to torture my friend with what she probably thought were good intentions but that really only displayed a lack of consideration. She took Louise for granted most of the time, but if it looked as if Louise had stopped waiting for Sydney to leave her boyfriend—POW—there was Sydney, trying to get Louise back where she felt Louise belonged—wrapped around one little finger. I'd watched it many times. They danced around one another, one always coming forward as the other backed away. And always it was Louise I later saw with hard blue eyes and a closed mouth. She's so sensitive. She should take better care.

"Sydney Lane," I said through the lighting of my cigarette. "I must say, I did not expect to find you so far out of your way and sitting on my bench today."

"This is your bench?"

"Yes. It is. But you can sit there." I remained standing.

"Thank you."

"Sure. Here to see Louise?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too. We have our next class together."

"How long till then?"

"Fifteen. How long have you been waiting?"

"About an hour."

"Don't know her schedule, huh?"

"No idea. But I thought it would be nice to sit here a while and get stared at by people who don't know me."

"It can be like that here. Haven't seen you in a while. How are you?"

"Fine." Quiet, thoughtful. Careful. Always like that with me, but not Louise.

"Good. I'm going for a bite to eat. Have a good night."

"You too. And I'll let her know where you are."

"She'll know."

"Of course."

It seemed the blue sky itself shone down to light and warm us in the absence of the sun. Louise walked out one glass door with her head up and a cigarette in her hand, pulling up in her gunfighter stance as she reached in her pocket for matches. Sydney stood from her seat along the wall behind Louise and held out her lighter, flame high. I stood by a window as Louise bent to the flame, as they spoke, as a folded piece of paper passed from the hand of one into that of the other.

Louise did not meet me in the cafeteria, as was the custom, so I carried a sandwich for each of us into class where she gratefully took the one I offered. The note was on the table in front of her and a little towards me . . . I watched her pick it up and spread it flat on the desk before reading it through the tunnel of her hands around her eyes. It could not have taken so long to read it as she took. The handwriting was too small and not neatly written enough for me to read it, too. She began what must have been a response but stopped at half a page, tore it at the middle, and crumpled the portion she'd covered. She wrote one word clearly in large letters on the leftover half sheet.

After class, she did not stand with me outside the door to smoke a cigarette, as was the custom. She did not mention the letter or her plan of action regarding it, though there most certainly was one.

We started for the parking lot together, silent, as we are able to do. Her eyes swept the parked cars. We passed the first row and she broke into a trot, tossing back a quick goodbye. Her pace quickened to a run as she hit the lower lot, her bag strapped across her chest, bouncing against her back. The scrap in her hand fluttered.

I couldn't see Sydney in the car; she was lying back. Without breaking her stride, Louise leapt onto the front bumper and sprawled across the hood, pressing the one word note against the window so hard I could hear it. Sydney rose into view, her speed influenced by alarm, and stepped hurriedly from the vehicle. She pulled Louise off the hood and clutched the small form against herself. They were kissing when I opened my car door. I went home.

Claire Mullineaux

2

Olivia Bitting

The feel of my wallet in my right pocket was different than the feel of the folded page in my left, which was different than the feel of the normally empty pocket. I took it out, read it through again, folded it carefully and put it back. I hated it. It was awful, it didn't say what I wanted to at all. By the time Dar walked out the door beside me and swiveled her head to take in the courtyard, I was fairly disgusted with myself. I couldn't leave the letter on Louise's car because there were two black Civics in the lot and I didn't know which was hers. I'd found myself sitting in my car after I'd parked, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other on my keys, which were still in the ignition. I almost left. I had no idea what Louise's schedule was and I'd been sitting on that bench for an hour when Dar showed up.

I was not very pleased to see her. There have been nights when Dar and I drank too many beers, told ridiculous stories, and had really a great time together. There have been days when we talked at length and it seemed like she genuinely liked me. There have also been times when she looked at me like she wished I'd turn around and go home when she saw me at the door. It was a cool look—calculated, even. I think she practiced it in the mirror when she knew I was coming over.

When she walked out into the warm day and spotted me, she bent her head to light a cigarette and looked out from under her brow at me with that level contempt. She was polite, but there was that seething hatred under it. I wanted to like her, but it was really hard. I knew she would tell Louise to stay away from me. I knew she would like me again, every once in a while. She was such a pain in my ass, and Louise defended her every glance or word. Maybe she was really only being protective, but her ever so subtle little routine of trying to piss me off was not only transparent, but annoying as hell.

"Sydney Lane." She lit the cigarette. I hate it when she uses my middle name. "I must say, I didn't expect find you so far out of your way and sitting on my bench today."

"This is your bench?" I didn't get up.

"Yes. It is. But you can sit there."

"Thank you," I said. I meant to say, Fuck you."

"Sure. Here to see Louise?"

I wondered just who in hell else she thought I might be there to see. I said, "Yeah."

"Me too. We have our next class together."

"How long till then?"

"Fifteen. How long have you been waiting?"

"About an hour."

"Don't know her schedule, huh?"

"No idea. But I thought it would be nice to sit here and get stared at by people who don't know me."

"It can be like that here. Haven't seen you in a while. How are you?" She might have even cared how I was.

"Fine."

"Good. I'm going for a bite to eat. Have a good night."

"You too. And I'll let her know where you are."

"She'll know."

"Of course."

Bitch. After she went into the other building I reached for a smoke, but Louise came out before I got to it. As always she looked like she walked out of a movie with her tousled hair and her smooth stride, the way her clothes fit (or didn't fit), the way she stopped dead with her feet apart and placed her cigarette between her lips while the other hand patted for matches. She could never find a light. I stood up and said, "Hey." She turned her head and I lit her cigarette. She waited while I took out my own and lit it.

She smoked while I waited for her to return my greeting.

"So, how are you?" I asked.

Sometimes she'd take it and run, answer with something like, "Well, the sun's up and I'm stocked on coffee and cigarettes, so it can't be all bad. Little confused about what you're doing here, though." I'd hoped for it that day, but she said, "I'm pretty OK. You?"

"I'm good, I'm good. I guess, I mean, yeah, I'm pretty good."

She smoked and looked at me. "So what's up, Sydney?"

"Brought you a letter," I said, taking it out of my pocket and handing it over.

"What about?"

"Stuff." I wanted to say tell her it was about her and me. That it said she couldn't keep refusing to return my phone calls, because I was going to keep calling. That I wrote it all wrong but if she paid attention she'd see what I meant and believe me and forgive me for the fact that I couldn't just tell her to her face. I couldn't say anything.

"Hmm. OK. What have you been up to?"

"Uh, well, the usual, you know." We hadn't spoken in weeks and this was all I could think of to say. I felt like a retard.

"Yeah?"

"Actually, writing that letter five times."

"Five?"

"Yeah."

"Better be good, then."

"I hope so, I mean—well, just read it."

"Now?"

"Shit, no! Later. Not now."

She laughed at me. So did I. "Gotta go to class, kid. Have a good night."

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continued from page 13

"Have fun in class."

"Right."

I waited in my car. I was sure she would come to me. Fairly certain. I hoped she would. She had to. I was waiting.

I smoked three cigarettes in eleven minutes, checking my watch between each one. I laid my seat back to rest. I couldn't relax. I wanted to go home and be sure she'd write back or call, maybe stop by, email me, something. But I wasn't, so I waited. Sat up and started the car. Turned it off and decided to give her a few more minutes. Laid back again. It was so warm in there. I'd been waiting all day for a girl I somehow expected to come to me even though I hadn't been paying enough attention to know which car was hers. I was disgusted.

I woke up to the sound of something hitting my windshield and there she was, sprawled out on the hood of my car, smiling behind the piece of paper she'd slammed against the glass. It said "yes." I got out, dragged her off the car and squeezed her against me, bag and all. She broke loose and kissed me.

Joel Griffith

Withdraw is a Bitch

Kat Thorn

He was shot in the ass. If he was going to get shot, he picked a fitting place. I never liked him. Now don't get me wrong, I loved him. I just hated him. He left when I was ten. He was eighteen and determined to sow his wild oats or some shit like that. We passed each other on the stairway. He was carrying eighteen years of his life (it didn't amount to much) in broken cardboard boxes that were too small for their contents. I carried my things up the stairs as I claimed my new room. We never spoke during the transaction. Actually, we never really spoke at all.

He had a problem. He had lots of problems. I just didn't know exactly what until a few years later. I was thirteen. I was visiting my nephew who was just a baby–too young to know the shame of being a JR. I spent the evening with his wife. I always loved Stacey but I hadn't a clue where he found the charm to *get* her. She was pregnant before they married–maybe that clinched the deal. His sperm must have been smarter than he was.

I could smell alcohol through an inch of solid oak and I knew he was home. He made his presence known to the rest of the house when he kicked in the bedroom door. I guess he couldn't focus on the doorknob and figured it was easier to just kick the damn thing in. I was amused by the event; it reminded me of when I was five. I used to pray Stacey would marry Bobby. When I was older, I prayed that she would file for divorce. I even tried to bribe her. I offered her my room if she would leave the bastard. She declined the offer. She declined that same offer at least twenty different times. She said he never hit her. I find that impossible to believe. God knows he beat the shit out of her emotionally. Christ, his nickname for her was Poopy. For the remainder of their marriage (eight years and another child later) the door was never fixed. Some twisted form of symbolism I guess.

Stacey miscarried early on in her second pregnancy. Personally, I would have heard bells going off, and seen a big neon - flashing warning sign. Stacey always did lack common sense. Their second son came one year, two withdraws, and about a thousand broken promises later.

Little Bobby's second birthday party was held at a rehab center after the "ass shooting." The story was always that Bobby was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's a fucking great story, simple and to the point, very believable, but not true. The truth is a hell of a lot more interesting.

Bobby was looking to score some coke (or whatever drug he was addicted to at the time). He took his black friend into an area clock full of white trailer park trash. Bobby's connection had a dog and the beast apparently had never seen a black man before because he went stock wild. He barked his ass off until the rest of the guy's white trash relatives came running with shotguns (not surprisingly they all inhabited the same trailer park). Bobby managed to get into a trailer, leaving Donnie to fend off the masses. One of *them* grabbed Donnie and screamed to Bobby (I quote), "Get out here or I am going to shoot this nigger." Bobby came out of the trailer, hands up and unarmed. He was greeted with the butt of a shotgun to his face and a bullet in his ass. Donnie took a bullet in his chest. He sobered up. Bobby wasn't "ready."

A bullet lodged in gluteus maximus, every bone in your leg blown to bits, and an MD telling you that if the bullet had gone up, you'd be six feet in the ground should have done the trick. I couldn't have guessed that the bullet was the start of a story that would span the next six years.

During the birthday festivities, Bobby hugged Stacey. It was the first hug. The first hug that any of us had seen since their wedding day. He proclaimed undying love to her and a long overdue devotion to his family. He guaranteed this was the final time. Everyone cried, not because of the emotion of the declaration but because we wanted so desperately to believe it. Stacey smiled and told him she still loved him. We didn't tell him that she had had a mental breakdown and was just released from the hospital. No one wanted to ruin the moment.

The transition was remarkable. Bobby diligently went to AA meetings. He became a sponsor and a regular meeting leader. He even took an interest in the church. He attended Mass every Sunday. I think he even carried a Bible in his pocket. I attended his first-year sobriety celebration. There was my brother, and this time it did not shame me to refer to him that way. He was standing on one good leg telling his story. I looked around the room that night at the men and women who made up the circle of alcoholics. They were all watching Bobby, some of them moved to tears, by the story. He

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Wishing Well

Daniel R. Sadler

Below the surface of the wishing well
Lies a reef of metallic dreams,
Each coin remembering a hope that was once important.
And while a few retain their brilliance—shining for old friends,
Most don't believe in magic, forget those that kissed them,
Fade into rust.

The Conversation of Riddles

Kevin Wisniewski

The conversation of riddles and music and watercolors about to be said
By the lovers already lying on their sides and staring into one another's eyes,
The man writing a three-page letter to the woman he left behind in London,
And the woman standing nude at the top of the stairs waiting for her sun to peek
Its way through the windows of her heart.
The one who sleeps easy and cares not whom he has hurt,
Happy that tomorrow he will begin again,
And the other, full of tears and afraid to move, thinking that tomorrow she will be dead.

Mac Smith

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had done it. He overcame alcohol, an assortment of drugs, a disability that will be with him the rest of his life, and he was rebuilding his family. He was a man. He was my brother and I was proud. No one told me that he fell off the wagon twice that year.

It wasn't long after that first year that he changed. He didn't have time for meetings or mass. Nights and weekends were devoted to the gym. He said he was rebuilding his body. Bobby had been well-defined before the shooting and so it was a believable story. Even if it wasn't, it kept him out of the bars. No one thought he was beginning an affair.

Her name was Michelle and she was a bitch. Everything about her screamed it. She was tall and anorexically thin. She had kinky bleached blond hair (the roots had grown out a few inches at our first meeting). Her face was covered in a layer of neatly painted makeup to cover the scars. Apparently a few years back she had been driving drunk and crashed into a tree. She went through the windshield. She could easily be the poster child for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. She knew he was married when she met him.

We didn't want to meet her; we made that clear but apparently not clear enough. I was the first. It was during football practice. I went with Stacey to help her with the boys. Bobby showed up with her half way through practice. They sat diagonally across from us. The battle lines were drawn. I watched her. The whole time I just sat there and watched her. I wanted her to know that I saw. She knew I was watching her too. I must have made her uncomfortable because she moved three times. But, all three times my eyes followed. I couldn't figure it out. She was nothing like Stacey. Stacey was beautiful. She had long chestnut hair, emerald eyes that sparkled if the sun shone just right. She was a size six at most and every man wanted her. They seemed awed by her beauty and her unintentional charm. Everything about this new woman was fake.

They needed a place to live for a month. Against my father's (and my wishes), my mother welcomed them into our home. She never could deny her baby boy anything. A month turned into six months. Six months of pure absolute hell.

My parents never fought. They argued as married couples sometimes do but never seriously and always with a humorous undertone. Bobby and Michelle fought. They fought a lot, bad fights. My father remodeled the room that connects to the kitchen and that is were they stayed. Even with the door closed it was still possible to hear the midnight fights from upstairs. Mostly they involved Stacey. Michelle was threatened by his past with Stacey. She knew she would never be able to replace Stacey. For better or for worse they had children together and Michelle could not contend with that.

Bobby spent an abnormal amount of time in the room. He rarely came out. The only time he did come out was to eat or piss. No one commented on it. My mother put on her maternal blinders. My father was backed into a wall. He wanted them to leave, but he couldn't bring himself to go against my mother. Mom used the "he is my son" argument. That argument wore thin with my father the first day he bought Stacey food.

After the divorce I stopped eating at Stacey's. She was a single mom raising two little boys and trying to work. Bobby owed six thousand dollars in back child support paments. The month that the notice appeared in our mailbox, Michelle got tits. Bobby paid for Michelle to get tits but there was never anything in Stacey's refrigerator except day old bread and stale milk and day old bread.

It wasn't easy for my dad to admit that his grandchildren and their mother were struggling for food. That first time we spent $250 on groceries. We stocked both the refrigerator and freezer. It was Stacey's Christmas wish that year that she would not have to struggle to feed her boys. Santa came early that year. When we got home, we were greeted with a tearful thank you on our answering machine.

At one point Stacey almost lost her car. The payment was due and she couldn't pay it. At the time Bobby owed roughly seven thousand dollars in child support. Meanwhile he was living rent free with his wife in our home, snorting heroine and doing a miraculous job hiding it from Mom and Dad. Dad saved the car. He made some phone calls and explained the situation to the bill collectors. To this day Stacey is driving that car.

It amuses me that the woman who pleaded the "he is my son" argument was the same woman to kick them out. They were fighting and I was home only they didn't know I was home. I heard Michelle say, "Don't you fucking hit me again." I don't like Michelle, but I certainly do not condone abuse. Bobby could have kicked a dog and I would have felt the same way. I wanted to call the police but decided to call my mom instead. She could barely hear me because the fighting was so loud. Not fifteen minutes later our door flew open and a very pissed off little Greek woman stood in the doorway. They moved out at the end of the week. The marriage did not last much longer.

Bobby was then thirty and had nothing. He had an ex-wife (who had found a new lover), a divorce on the way, and two children. One hated him and the other didn't remember him. He still owes those boys over $10,000.

Stacey met Tom one year after the divorce was final. He was the man she should have married and made babies with. Tall, handsome, the regular prince charming. Although Stacey still found herself missing Bobby, she fell in love with Tom. He treated her the way Bobby should have. Tom was Bobby's replacement. He was Stacey's support system and in many ways he was Bobby and Bricen's new father. He played ball with Bobby, went to all the sporting events and he read stories to Bricen. They could count on Tom.

Bobby did make a drugged–up attempt to have a relationship with his children. Little Bobby had not seen him in months and didn't want to. Bricen on the other hand was scared of him. To Bricen, then two, Tom was Daddy. The attempt at a father-son relationship failed miserably. Heroin was victorious over the children. Little Bobby said to me not too long ago, "I have seen my dad for 15 minutes in the last three months." I wonder if he is still keeping track.

There comes a day in almost every

continued on page 16

Exiting to Rain

Ann Sosnowski

I.

The sun is tardy.
Early in the morning,
it's a smoke packed evening.
"I have to go home now."
"But it's cold outside."

ii.

Puddles of rain
catch the excess.
At age thirteen,
my girls
and I ran
with naked feet
and cold noses
through the alleyways.
Nothing ever
hurt so much.
But then again,
music isn't for the
weak at heart.

iii.

You say I probably
lost a few, each in
tune to a frequency.
At age eighteen,
nothing
hurt so much.
Music, the Ear and Ecstasy.

IV.

Contours
among rain dried
sheets.
You hold my hand
in between rain drops.
To catch the excess
you recite Eliot's
The Waste Land.
This is atypical and
warm.

V.

"Baby, it's cold outside."
"But I have to go."
Morning dew,
you are driving
too fast.
I promised to savor

:la di da:

to savor you.

My feet are torn.

vi.

It limps into
the turnaround,
the sun on time
today.
It's a smoke packed
morning.
A separate level
seeps into our toes.

Rain-soaked in puddles.
Your recitation halts.

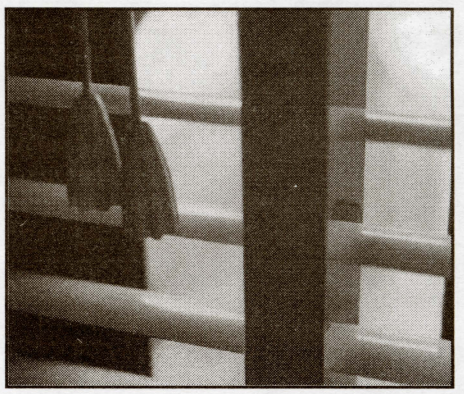
vii.

I am sure I
lost a few.
Nothing ever hurt so much

as a turnaround.

viii.

"But, it's cold outside."



Julie Ceanfaglione

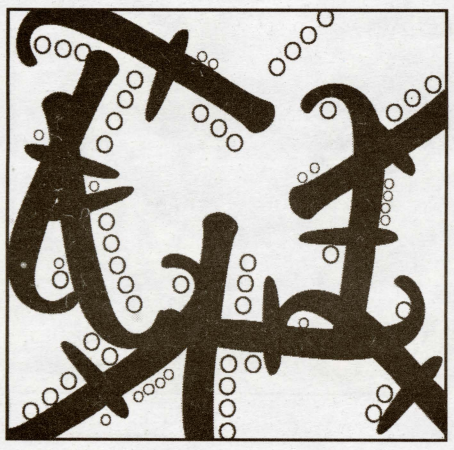
continued from page 15

addict's life when it's time to get clean. That time for Bobby came about three months ago. He was homeless, living in his truck. He had no health insurance, he had pending charges for abuse, he had absolutely no money, and no woman to take care of him. My parents let him move back home on the condition that he was not using. I offered him my room. The withdraw was supposed to last seven days. It didn't. It was supposed to be bad, he was supposed to have the shits, be throwing up constantly. He threw up once. I was the only one to find that odd. He stayed home for three days. But then he started going out; he would be gone for the night and come back the next morning. No one questioned him. My dad was indifferent, my mother was tired of caring so damn much and I didn't have to ask, I already knew what was happening.

One night he left and no one heard from him for over a week. I figured he was dead. He wasn't. He showed up a week or two later. I was in bed and I could hear him rummaging downstairs in the kitchen. I assumed he was looking for food so I chose not to go downstairs. I didn't want to embarrass him; I didn't want to embarrass myself. He left, I guess he didn't find what he was looking for (we moved all the medicine out of the cabinets). Later that day he met me outside. He needed money. I already knew for what. He needed some quick cash to get high. I guess he was done pawning what belongings he had. There was no way in hell I was giving him that cash. If it were for food or gas, I would have considered it. Not for heroin. He said he was ready to blow his brains out. I figured if he couldn't afford the drugs, he couldn't afford the bullets.

We got a call a few days later. Bobby was arrested for possession of narcotics. My parents posted a $500 bail. He is living at home again. And last time I checked on him he was curled up in a fetal position on our couch, crying like a baby, and begging for drugs to "ease" the withdraw.

Carla McCollums



Gasoline

Christina Garvine

Such smells always remind me of him. The minute the smell of gasoline permeates my nose, all the memories flood my mind.

He used to stay out all hours of the night. The morning paper would hit the door before he did. In the end I was thankful for his nightly escapades. At least he wasn't next to me in bed, stinking the whole room with the stench of alcohol. Or waking me up at 3:00 a.m. in a rage, shouting orders to clean the house up before he shot ten rounds into my ugly-ass face.

He sang a much different tune when we first met. I was nineteen and was waitressing in a diner until I learned enough money to start college. Every day at noon he would stroll across the street and come in for his lunch break. That damn smell of gasoline walked through the door before the sound of the bell alerting me to a new customer. He always sat near the cash register. I could feel his blue eyes burning a hole in me as I poured coffee. There was something about his mechanic's uniform that really attracted me to him. Outside of my attraction for him physically, his personality was charming and he was always polite. His compliments flowed endlessly from his smug mouth like a waterfall. He made me feel confident, like I could do anything in the world that I pleased.

After a year of dating we married. Then, the lying started. It started with little things like not being where he said he would be. I just looked the other way, convincing myself that it was just miscommunication. When I told him that I had saved enough money up and was finally going to start college, he was unsupportive and upset. He said that it was time now to have a baby together. So, I gave in, as usual, to his manipulative decision. Nine months later, Tony and I were the proud parents of a baby girl. We named her Phoenix. She brought me so much joy and work that I hardly paid attention to what was going on with Tony.

After months of arguing with Tony, he let me go to school, even though he thought my place was at home with Phoenix. I enrolled in a small college to study nursing. I enjoyed my classes and excelled in them. Going to class was a break from taking care of Phoenix and keeping the house clean so Tony wouldn't get angry. The spring semester of my first year was my last semester there. One night in March I came home to find my one-year-old daughter alone in her little bathtub. I called out for Tony but received no response. When I glanced into our bedroom, I saw him passed out on the floor with a bottle of Jim Beam by his side. That's when the reality of the situation hit me; the bottle was his best friend. Phoenix could have drowned. I quit school out of fear of something happening to my daughter while I was gone. It stoked a fire way down inside me.

His auto shop would call home to see if he was going to decide to come in to work. The only reply I had was that he left the house in his uniform and I assumed that was where he was spending his day. After a few times, they fired him. For months he would still pretend to go to work even though I knew the truth. I just didn't care anymore. He was so distant and cold to me that I was glad when he wasn't home.

One day he snapped. After coming home from his pretend job, he found the house a mess. I tried to explain that Phoenix was sick and I had to run around all day to the doctor and pharmacy. I didn't have time to put the house in the spotless condition it was usually in. He threw down his jacket and attacked me with a chair. Poor Phoenix crouched in her closet listening to my cries whimper out to a deadly silence.

After that I told him I knew about him being fired and I told him that I was going to leave him. He smiled and said that if I left it would cost me my life. Tony didn't pretend anymore. I had two waitressing jobs to support the bastard and Phoenix. With no family to help out with her, Phoenix spent most of the time in daycare.

A combination of exhaustion and overwhelming anger made *me* snap one day. Phoenix and I arrived home after another long, hard day to find the usual scene. Tony was passed out on the floor. Did he know that beds had been invented? He usually drank himself into oblivion during the day and would sober up enough by evening to go out and do God knows what. That evening was different. The idea hit me like a ton of bricks and I impulsively acted on it. I put Phoenix back in her car seat and told her that we were going out to dinner to celebrate. She peered up at me with curious wonderment. I picked up one of the containers of gasoline from the garage and carried it into the house. The top popped off and its strong odor spread. In delirium I poured it everywhere. As I sat down in the chair next to Tony, I lit a cigarette and congratulated myself on such a grand idea. When I got up from the chair to go get back in the car, my cigarette flew through the air landing on the gasoline-saturated carpet. I ran out of the house. I had never seen a fire so beautiful. Layers of red and orange engulfed the house and swallowed all of my problems down to its deepest depths. Phoenix grabbed my hand and smiled in silent relief and satisfaction. I know she might have seemed too young to understand it all, but she could sense my happiness and that made her happy. Nobody missed Tony. The cops didn't even investigate the fire thoroughly. It was attributed to an unextinguished cigarette igniting the house. The cigarette belonging to a man that fell asleep while it was lit. That was it! No jail time and no suspicion. It was almost too easy.

"Mom snap out of it. The hose stopped pumping like ten minutes ago. You're going to be late for your own graduation. What's your deal?"

"Sorry Phoenix. I guess I was just lost in thought."

Matt Christensen

January 4, 2001

Ann Sosnowski

I watch him open Christmas
gifts,the sparkles dissected by
scissors,
soft plastic bows gutted.
An apprehension of receiving
but not giving;
poring over each lure, the
fish scale, the metal detector,
like he only deserves the coal
and ash of a fallen hearth.

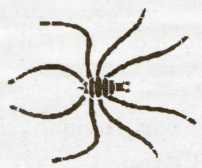
This morning, snow fell
diagonally, caught branches
of age old oaks and
raspberry bushes.
Murmured thank you's lay in
the pier's footsteps as his
slight gait led him to a
daily fishing hole in the cold.

My children would never hear
stories of twelve pound bass and
pelicans rescuing the morning
of its frailty.

I hoped, on a single flake,
that snowdrifts and salt trucks
would shake the bitterness
from my elbows,

that maybe next year, winter
could appear more fruitful.

Outside the Window
Melanie Bennett



It was early one morning. The sun was just waking, and I was sitting at the kitchen table, the aroma of coffee floating through the room. Just as I was about to rise to get my cup of Joe, I caught a glimpse of something in the window. It was beautiful. She was sitting outside of my window, clinging to her piece of artwork, like a child with candy. She was brownish black with four sets of skinny legs, perfectly sculpted to each joint. She had a round, black head, with two eyes that peered around. On her broad back, when the sunlight hit just right, there was a tan-colored emblem that she carried with pride. The symbol was shaped like a cross with curved edges. It was a sign of strength, pride, and courage. This symbol stood out on the web to attract the opposite sex, but on a tree or in a bush, this symbol protected her from the world of predators.

Like a beaded necklace, the labyrinth glistened in the morning sunlight. Just hours before, she secreted a liquid to form this masterpiece. Now, each strand of polymer formed a prism, displaying an array of colors when hit by the morning sun. Each strand connected together, each row moved closer and closer, crocheted together with perfection; in the center–her target-where her next victim would be cocooned into her next meal. As she waited on her web for her dinner, her male friends around her built their webs to attract a female with which to mate. The male then depends on the female to catch his dinner.

While she sat in the center, she bragged of her ownership of this beautiful silk loom. This was her pride and joy–she protected it. She walked tall and slow, covering every millimeter of her trap. She had to be sure that each piece was securely attached. One flaw in her web, and her dinner could fly right through. The web was sticky like cotton candy, yet she glided across it with grace. The silk was her lifeline, providing her next meal. With patience, she sat and waited in the center of her enigma. Still and calm, she waited for him to find her. The morning dew glistened off her web, attracting young prey.

* * * * *

He sees the world around him with many eyes. His iridescent wings turn to rainbows in the sun. Buzz, buzz, buzz–he tastes the arms and legs of the humans around him. Concentrating on finding grub to feed on, unaware of his surroundings ...SLAM, right into her trap. With the polymer super-glued to his wings, he struggled to set himself free. Just then he caught a glimpse from behind. He saw the large predator approaching him like and Olympic runner to the finish line. Once she reached him, she secreted the powerful liquid to be sure that he would not escape. Wrapped like mummy, he struggled to get free. As his heartbeat began to slow–he surrendered. Her meal was now prepared, shimmering in the sunlight. She gorged herself. After finishing her meal she mended the holes in readiness for her next meal.

* * * * *

Like a beaded necklace, the labyrinth glistens in the morning sunlight. Each strand of polymer forms a prism. The light glistens off of masterpiece, drawing in her next dinner. She waits patiently until he finds her...

Dirt Road
Daniel R. Sadler

Dirt road, ancient direction.
A trail into the unknown,
Brown, rough, bare.

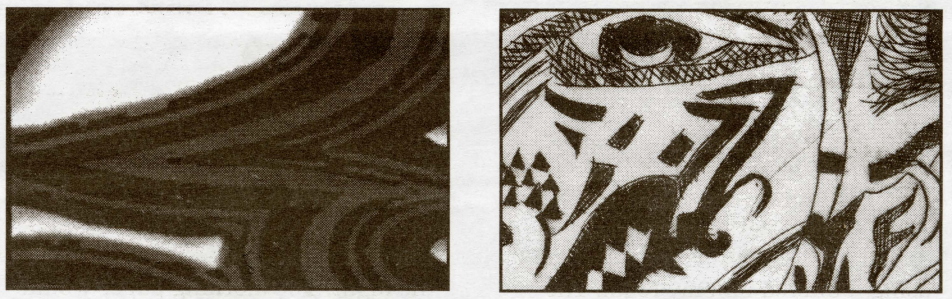
Fossilized with memories of travelers,
Hoof beats, the wrinkles of tires.

A quiet laugh at a homecoming,
A fearful cry of one who is lost,
Slip out from beneath old stones
And hitchhike on the wind.

Lane of the countryside
It knows field, riverside, oak.
But to doorways it bends away,
Windows have no view.

Sun glazed, its surface is hard
Its dust lies beyond waking, oblivious to air.
Bent by age, unbound at the edges
It drifts into shadow and covers with brush.

And though it forgets the aim of its task
One leg sticks out of the green.
With a foot on today, it stretches out its toes,
Remembers a purpose
And connects with concrete.



Drive
Jamie Rowland

As I halt at a four-way stop,
I see a shirtless man staggering along the salt-bleached pavement.
His head hangs on his chest.
His sun-baked back hunches like a great tree beaten in a summer storm.
His pants are held tightly around his waist by a fraying rope.
His grease-spotted boots bear no soles and no strings.
A tattered blue and red-checkered shirt covers his neck
and drapes across his shoulders.
His head moves side to side as he carefully looks at the ground for a treasure.
I never see him find anything.

My sunroof is open and the radio's on,
the pulse gently throbs my leg.
The cars rush past and I leisurely drive a familiar route.
Past 7-Eleven and the neon-pink Slurpee signs,
Down the avenue with the five-car long line waiting for a discounted car wash,
Through the stoplight at the high school that I attended.
The bi-level building with its mirror windows looks more
like a professional center than a school—
the envy of all others in the county.
Turning left at the bank with a four-sided message center,
I see the temperature is 69 degrees.
69 is the same number upside down.
Did you know that?

Cross your fingers and hold your breath,
an immediate right into a park,
full of streams, trees, ducks, and birds.
Paved pathways weave in and around the different gardens of the dead.
It is a long drive down this path.
On the right the gray marble mausoleum and the grand markers
of the wealthy and important,
on the left and in the back quarter of the park,
a few paces from a fresh water brook,
in the shadows of a column of century old maples,
rests my mother.

Unmarked and dirt-covered, no grass has grown here yet.
I borrow the vase from my Nan and Pap and stroll
down to the rock-lined brook.
I dip the cold, cast-bronze vase into the water.
I fill it until it will hold no more.
My knee joints crack when I stand.
I drop a bunch of fresh wild flowers into the water.

I turn and look back at the 4 by 8 foot patch of topsoil.
Old dead flowers and leaves crackle in the breeze
My heartbeat slows as I approach the spot.
The wind freezes my tear-blurred eyes
and I replace the vase.

I hear the birds singing in the trees;
I can't understand how life can come to this.
I wonder when her grass will grow.
The willows are weeping with me.
I say a prayer and make a wish,
my tears float down my cheek.
The purple and white MOM flower display,
and a mud-stained card addressed to her
are at my feet.

The bird's song is no longer as sweet,
The sun's light is not as warm,
My nights are longer and lonelier than ever:
The willows still weep with me.

Ruthie and The Old Farmhouse

Jaclyn Thanner

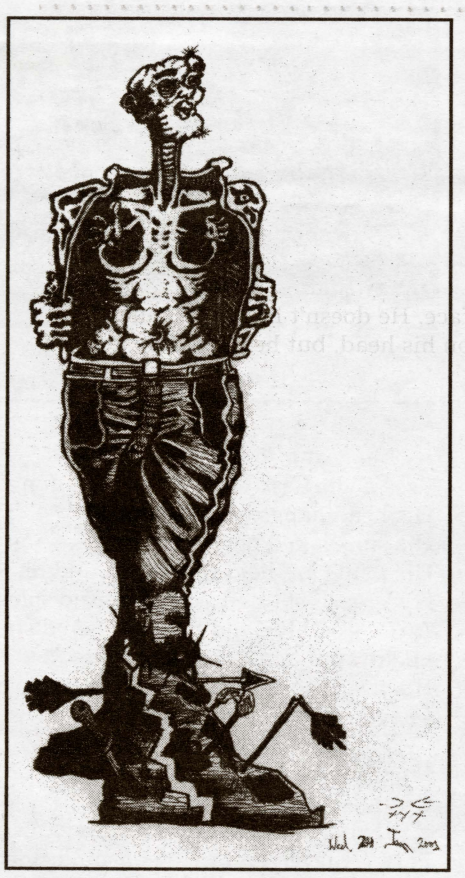
Mosquitoes and wicked bugs prepare to attack when they see our van headlights in the dusty driveway. They line up with an appetite for blood. As we approach the pea green dwelling, we raise our clean white socks to knee level in hopes that the attackers will not penetrate. We peer out the van windows to the merciless world around us with grasses so tall they seem to tickle the black skies with their splintery tips. Massive trees hide the house and their serpent-like roots strangle the muddy earth. It is so muddy. The house appears as though it has been dropped from the sky and suctioned to the earth where it sticks like gum to a shoe.

Thick summer mist makes us sweat through our cotton t-shirts as we leave our Jeep Cherokee and leap into the gray abyss. The residence is a breeding swamp. The nasty blood-suckers immediately swallow me. I can feel them grasp into my tender skin like a thousand needle punctures. I attempt to swat and smack them dead but they are incorrigible. I enter their territory. It is as though they fast all year until midsummer waiting for us to visit this place so they can quench their blood thirst.

Finally, we make our way to the front of the house. It is a green reptile with its siding like rough skin blending in with its olive colored surroundings. It needs a paint job. The creaky door is soiled from heavy evening rains shooting down through the sludge in front of the door causing a spackling of mud in the entrance. The sides of the house are caving in. Aunt Ruthie says on scorching hot days, wandering cows lean on the sides to get shade and keep cool. I guess the summer heat is unbearable even for cows.

Unfortunately, the inside of the house is not any cooler. There is no air conditioning except a single electrical fan that only operates on low speed and does nothing to dissipate the smell of grease and bacon. All of the furniture—tables, couches, beds, toilets, and lamps—feverishly sweat just as we do. My feet itch from the shaggy plum colored carpet that contrasts with the orange and bottle-green tones of everything else.

This house is for old ladies who enjoy sitting at a table sipping hot lemon tea and could care less about watching television. I, on the other hand, am ecstatic to get at least one of the four channels to work on the ancient television set. A few games keep us busy and help pass the time. I solve crossword puzzles, I bang on the chipped keys of the black and cream colored organ ignoring the fact that I have no musical talent. I attempt to fix a doll's loose head and I play pool with one of my siblings on the dusty, lop-sided pool table. Or maybe it isn't the table that is



Joel Griffith

lop-sided. I have a feeling the whole is off balance.

The games get dull so I like to wander around the house. Beyond the dark cherry staircase, a vertical shelf wrapped in wallpaper to look like wood holds filthy ceramic trinkets and mysterious statues. Tinted yellow papers are sprawled all over it along with four mini photo albums with snapshots of my extended family. You would think that we have never aged because the albums contain the same old pictures. I am still a six-year-old blue-eyed little girl posing for the camera with hot pink corduroy pants, shaggy hair, teeth the size of popcorn kernels, and a Kool-Aid mustache.

Every summer it is the same ritual. I take a seat at the table and immediately my thighs stick to the tacky plastic chair cushion. I glance over my shoulder and see Aunt Ruthie humming sweet songs to herself as she fumbles around the suds and soapy water in the yellow tub in her sink where she soaks her dishes. To my right, by the refrigerator, is a large window. Dust and cracked pots holding prickly plants, dry and white from the sun, cover the windowsill. I rest my elbows on the plastic peach tablecloth and itch my nose. I think the bugs fly up there. I am paranoid about the bugs. Can't they leave me alone for even one second? I look up and see a ring of insects circling the light fixture. The light bulb is too bright. As I sit at the table with the blinding bulb above my head, I feel like a detective is interrogating me. But instead of a detective, Aunt Ruthie is the one hammering me with questions. "Did you sleep well? Did you hear the cat howling in the wall? Don't you think the weather is nice today? Do you want some breakfast?" Of course, I didn't sleep well. I tried ignoring the cat by cupping my ears. No, the weather is not nice today. The heat makes me run a fever.

I have asked my mother many times why Ruthie is so anxious. She tells me that Ruthie has always been vivacious. I guess Ruthie's anxiety stems from her lively nature. She is like a wound up doll. She walks vigorously for a seventy year old. Her steps are quick. I easily recognize the sound of her slippers shuffling across the floor. Screech. Swish. Screech. Swish. Her tiny body stays thin because she is active. Sewing and crocheting keep her busy along with playing her organ. Ruthie's enjoyed activity is talking. She lives to tell stories and sing songs. The words of her songs are never real words. She sounds like a baby cooing. Talking satisfies her deeply even when she has no audience. It's as if Ruthie pulls her own string in her back to charge her up for the day and then tucks the string away underneath her polyester shirt.

Many years ago, Ruthie used to baby-sit my sisters, brother, and me. She was like a kid herself. We enjoyed her high-pitched voice and her funny musical noises. We enjoyed her hugs when she nestled us close to her chest and we felt her necklace cold against our cheeks. Naptime was never a dreaded thing for me because Ruthie would always sit by my bed and stroke my back with her fingernails and make up silly stories in all of which I was the main character; a queen reigning over my castle in the clouds or an acrobat in sequins soaring in the air.

Visiting Ruthie has shown me how difficult it is to adjust to a lifestyle unlike my own. We all have our own ideas of what it home to us. Ruthie's farm is far from my idea of a home, but for Ruthie, her soul lies there. It is everything. She has independence and freedom there. She doesn't even feel comfortable sleeping over at my house because it is overwhelming for her. Similarly, I do not feel comfortable in her house because I am so used to my own computerized and motorized lifestyle. Neither of us is used to change. I am happy that she finds joy and ease in her own house of simplicity.

Perhaps we are turned off by circumstances or people that we see as "weird" because we are unwilling to put up with things that stray from our everyday standard of living. I am thankful that I know Ruthie and her house because it is during these visits that I appreciate my own way of life. My ability to tolerate Ruthie's lifestyle tells me that I must truly love her unconditionally.

Rest for a Patriarch

Ugonna Anyaugo

Dedicated to my grandfather, Mr. Paul Ezekwe. Each day the void gets bigger and bigger...

Birds arose early to mark the
Solemn day,
Shedding silky feathers in remembrance
Of greatness
In the human form.
Born into absolute poverty,
The habituating beauty of his soul
Made him rich beyond
The limitations of mankind.

This day the sun refused to awaken,
Weeping to the music of the dead.
In the horizon, a burdened country
Soaks the soil with a storm of tears,
Realizing the impending void.
As the young look on with
Lingering questions,
The rite of pain transcends
To every individual,
Bringing the companionship of misery.

Kim Kutlik

Travel

Kevin Wisiewski

It was a new day yesterday,
But today we're getting old.
Gently, gently we are pulled apart.
Standing in the sound of silence,
Caressing each other's face
As if to savor these last moments.
Living in the other's eyes, our story
Plays out in my mind and I can't
Remember why I'm leaving.
I don't want to lose you, but I've already
Lost you. A decision I couldn't make again.
The placid whispers in my ear
Almost bring regret back to my lips.
But the cool breeze reminds me to breathe
And not become comfortable in your arms.
Where I travel, I know not. I tell you
One day I will return, with a smile hiding a tear.
Slowly, slowly I turn away from you.
I know I'm never coming back.

Matt Christianson

Life at 100 mph

Anna Arbaugh

That was his life,
work harder and faster.
Get to the point, don't tell me the rest.
Everything can wait,
There's work to be done.

Another late night, one more long week,
it never seems to end.
Does he notice that the sun rose this morning?
When the snow falls, does he even see the flakes,
or is it just one more problem to deal with?
He's busy and moving too fast.

My life is different now,
work smart and creative.
Other things are important, too.
How many people were helped today?

The end of a day,
a wonderful sunset to watch.
I saw your smile today.
The snow has covered the landscape
with a sparkling veil, and I laugh.

There's a newness in every day.

Damn. . .

Crystal Walter

Seated at the head of the kitchen table reading the Sunday Times, he waits for his eggs, bacon, toast and black coffee. He is an older man in his late seventies and has few large but many small wrinkles around his face. He doesn't have that much hair on his head, but he does have a patch that circles his bald spot. As I walked into the room, he looked over his glasses, which hung on the rim of his nose, and said in a deep, loud, boisterous voice, "Come here, young lady, and give your poppop a damn kiss." For as long as I have known him, which is 22 years, he has always somehow put the damn word in every sentence. Even if it didn't fit, he would use it some way. As I reach over the newspaper, I give him a peck on his stubby cheek, which hasn't been shaven in a day or two. My grandfather doesn't have a certain odor to him because he thinks that perfumes and colognes smell like "stink water," whatever that smell might be.

My grandfather is a friendly man and, whether you are a stranger or a relative, he expects a hug or kiss from the ladies and a handshake from the men or boys. Nowadays most boys I know try to show how manly they are by squeezing the other man's hand as hard as they can. But fair warning to those boys, because my grandfather has worked his whole life as a supervisor for the construction force so he has a mighty strong handgrip, one that will turn your knuckles white. I would also like to give fair warning to the ladies because if he suggests a hug, then for a few brief seconds you may black out. But once he lets go you will be fine because the oxygen will rush back into your lungs in no time.

My grandfather's full name is Robert Burtlet Adams, but he is also known as poppop, father, uncle, brother, husband, and friend. However, if you ask my grandmother, who has been married to him for 50 odd years, what my grandfather is, she will respond by saying, he is a headstrong, hard-working, stubborn jackass. Now that might seem a little harsh, but trust me, once you get to know him and work with him, you will realize that he likes things done his way and he is very hard-headed in what he does. My grandmother has always said when poppop passes away, his gravestone will be the end of a donkey with the saying that this man is very hard-headed and stubborn. But she will comment that he has raised three beautiful children, two boys and one girl, along with two grandchildren, and that he has always loved them very much. And I must brag that my brother and I are the grandchildren that he has raised and he did a damn excellent job.

He was the authority figure in the household. When it came to punishment, it was my grandfather's foot, hand or object that went across your bottom or the back of your head. My grandfather was the type of man who smelled trouble a mile away and knew when you had done something wrong. Now normally, he would either give you a swift kick to the ass, as he would say, or a rap across the back of your head, which would send your hair flying forward so you learned never to do that again. It wasn't that the blow itself hurt, it was the fact that his hands were as hard as steel and his foot normally had a construction boot on the end of it. My grandfather's famous saying after he was done punishing my brother or me was, "This hurt me more than it hurt you" and in the back of my mind I always said, "Yeah right, why is my bottom or head stinging with pain if it hurt you more than it supposedly hurt me?"

My grandfather is a very loving and caring man and he would do anything for anybody. So if you see him walking down the street, give a wave and he will wave back, give him a wink and he will wink back. But if you are a tall, long-legged, redheaded woman, all I can say is run for your life because he has been searching for you forever.

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